

Athletic trainer: Removing football helmets contributes to heat safety during practice

By: Greg Tufaro | @MyCJ_Sports August 12, 2013

As most high school football teams throughout the state open training camp this week, Phil Hossler has a simple suggestion for coaches, not only in New Jersey, but nationwide, which he believes could help prevent heat-related illness and death on the gridiron.

A veteran certified athletics trainer at East Brunswick and member of the National Athletic Trainers' Association Hall of Fame, Hossler recommends all coaches allow players to remove their helmets while not participating in drills.

"Let cooler heads prevail," said Hossler, noting 40 percent of heat loss escapes through the scalp. "We need to get the word out across the country to coaches to simply allow helmets to be removed when the player is not involved."

Wearing a football helmet, Hossler said, exacerbates thermal load and maintains a player's high internal body temperature. Allowing players to remove helmets decreases body temperature through the critical evaporation of sweat from the head. When helmets are removed, body temperature decreases along with fatigue, improving performance, especially during conditioning sessions.

Hossler, along with Dr. Douglas Casa, chief operating officer at the University of Connecticut-based Korey Stringer Institute, named after the former Minnesota Vikings offensive lineman who died from heat stroke in 2001 and dedicated to exercise heat research and education, presented the NFL, NCAA, USA Football and National Federation of State High School Associations earlier this month with their proposal.

"We are seeking their endorsement on what seems to be just a simple common sense answer to a very potentially catastrophic problem," said Hossler, a former high school and college football player. "I don't know why it took my entire career to come up with this idea. It isn't rocket science. Just take the helmets off."

Beating the heat

According to the National Center for Catastrophic Sports Injury Research at the University of North Carolina, at least 31 football players have suffered heat-stroke deaths since 1995 in the United States (according to the most recent data from USA Football and the NFHS, more than 1.1 million student-athletes and more than 3 million children aged 6 to 14 play scholastic and youth football, respectively, nationwide).

Hossler said whether the temperature is around 80 degrees, as is forecast for New Jersey this week, or if the heat index soars to 110, as it did the day Stringer collapsed on the field, all coaches should get into the habit of allowing players to remove their helmets.

“Any recommendation from the medical community that benefits the safety of our student-athletes has to be looked at in a positive manner,” said Bishop Ahr athletics director Mike Wolfthal, who chairs the Greater Middlesex Conference Football Committee. “Whether it be taking off your helmet, having unlimited water breaks, if it’s good for the kids, good for their health, we should look to support it.”

Heightened awareness about hydration, the increased use of cold-water immersion tubs, the presence of certified athletics trainers at practice and the adoption of an “acclimatization period” by conferences in 11 statewide athletic associations nationwide — including New Jersey — may contribute to reducing the incidence of heat-related illness and death, Hossler said.

Removing helmets during inactivity would be another step toward that goal.

“Although some think that keeping the helmets on during breaks and conditioning sessions ‘makes the athletes tough,’ it increases the risk for developing exertional heat illnesses,” Hossler and Casa wrote. “Heat retention is a cumulative malady and players should be able and encouraged to remove helmets on sidelines, during breaks and even while standing and watching other teammates performing drills.”

Dialogue with coaches

Rick Mantz, past president of the New Jersey Football Coaches Association, who previously coached at South Brunswick and Hillsborough, said he understands trainers operate in the best interest of student-athletes, but he believes the input of coaches should be solicited regarding matters such as the removal of helmets during practice.

“Every coach, every parent — all of us — wants to keep kids safe,” Mantz said. “None of us wants to get our kids hurt. But I will be honest, and I know a lot of coaches have been frustrated because, especially in recent years, we’ve been told by trainers and told by others what we should and shouldn’t do with kids on the field. And in some cases it actually hamstring us.

“With the issue of helmets, it’s a difficult situation for us as coaches. You certainly don’t want to hurt anybody. But you’ve got to find ways to acclimatize the kids, you’ve got to find ways to put those kids under a little duress, you’ve got to find ways to get those kids prepared to play a 48-minute game on a hot day.”

Mantz said he has worked closely with athletic trainers in the past, seeking and adhering to their advice daily on heat-related matters before and during training camp practices.

“It’s important to have dialogue with trainers and coaches,” said Mantz, who currently serves as South Brunswick’s dean of students. “Coaches should certainly be a part of that conversation.”

Mantz said he believed some coaches initially resisted the NJSIAA-recommended “acclimatization” guidelines, which the GMC and other leagues across the state adopted five years ago.

The guidelines state teams cannot wear full pads during the first three days of training camp. In addition, practices cannot exceed five hours and a five-hour practice day may not be followed by a practice day great than three hours. Warmup, stretching, conditioning, weight training and cool down periods are all considered practice.

While many New Jersey high school football teams began official practice Monday, players across the state have been engaged in non-equipment practices since Graduation Day, some during a heat wave.

“All I’m asking,” Hossler said of his proposal, “is for coaches to readjust their thinking.”