

Soccer headgear catching on

Strapping on a martial-arts helmet to play soccer almost had Holly Hogan wanting to hide in embarrassment. Now, she refuses to step on a field without wearing a protective headguard, albeit a more flattering version.

Williamsville High School's leading scorer, Presley Kerber, sports protective headgear which is becoming more popular with professional and youth-league players. The use of protective headgear in soccer is not new. Springfield girls coach Bob Wharton recalls seeing a goalie wear a white plastic foam helmet with a chin strap in the 1980s.

But more and more players, especially women, are wearing headguards. As a high school freshman player in 2002, Hogan collided with a goalpost, then, within a month, hit her head on the ground. That led to two concussions — and to an ultimatum. "The doctor told me I couldn't play the rest of the season if I didn't wear it," said the 2005 Chatham Glenwood High School graduate. "I just wanted to play.

Do headguards really help?

There has been much debate on whether headguards protect players. Soccer head injuries are caused in a variety of ways, including contact with the goalpost, the ground or another player. Heading the ball also has been blamed. According to a study published in the *Journal of Athletic Training* last fall, in high school and college athletes, rates of concussions are highest in football and soccer. Girls suffered proportionately more concussions, although that doesn't explain why most players who use headguards are female.

High school referee and YMCA soccer director Paul Marconi says he's seen at least 15 area players — all girls — wearing soccer headguards this spring. At least 10 YMCA players wear them, he said. "I know more high schoolers wear them than my youth players," said Marconi.

'It helps my mom not freak out'

Two high school players using them are Glenwood senior Kelly Short and Williamsville's leading scorer, junior Presley Kerber. An elbow to the head during a match last season caused one of Kerber's three concussions. She uses headgear to protect herself from further injury — and for another very important reason. "It helps my mom not freak out," said Kerber, who sometimes also wears hers while playing basketball.

Short began wearing her headguard last year, not because of a head injury, but because, she admits, she was afraid to head the ball. However, she suffered a concussion when she was hit in the face below the headguard earlier this season. Now, her headguard is a necessity. "I figure if I got the helmet that I had protection and it can't hurt that bad," Short said. "A large purpose of my job as midfielder is to get headballs off punts. You do four of those in a game, and your head is throbbing for the rest of the night.

"The helmet takes a lot of the impact off." 'A half-inch of padding has to help'

Justin Stone, a Parade Magazine All-American soccer player at Springfield High in 1994, collided with a teammate during an indoor Premier Arena Soccer League game at Soccer World in March 2007. He fractured his skull in seven places and spent six days in the intensive-care unit. Stone, who was wearing nothing to protect his head when he was hurt, sees the benefit in headguards.

“A half-inch of padding has to help in some way, shape or form,” said Stone. “Put a piece of foam on your hand and hit a wall — is it going to hurt worse having it on or not having it on?”

“Given what happened to me, you never know what’s around door No. 2. It’s better to be safe than sorry. It’s better to be prepared than not.”

Speaking more as a mother and less as a coach, Glenwood assistant girls soccer coach Pam Hogan — Holly Hogan’s mother — thinks headguards should be a mandatory piece of equipment, much like shinguards.

“I think it’s silly we don’t protect ourselves as much as possible,” Hogan said. Holly Hogan said using her headguard eliminated the headaches she suffered as a result of heading the ball.

The only complaint Short, Kerber and Hogan have about the headguards is that heat can cause them to be uncomfortable. “Other than it getting hot,” said Kerber, “it’s pretty comfortable. I don’t really even notice it.” Her headguard has become second nature for Hogan, who continued to use it while playing for McKendree University.

“I remember playing without it in practice a few times,” she said. “It was awkward. I felt like I was playing without shoes on.”
- *By Marcia Martinez, The State Journal Register, April 21, 2008*

Parents on the bench

According to a new study conducted by the University of Washington, youth sports can be a fun learning experience or a stressful nightmare, and to achieve the former, parents and coaches need to be trained together. “There has been a drive in the last 20 years to teach coaches how to create a healthy psychological environment for young athletes,” says Frank Smoll, who, along with Ron Smith, has been studying and creating programs to improve youth sports for 25 years. “A culture has been created and there is an expectation that coaches will receive training. Unfortunately, too many moms and pops are all too willing to assume they don’t have a role in youth sports. However, they should support what trained coaches are trying to do. Parents and coaches working together are a powerful combination.”

Smoll and Smith studied 151 children in two different youth basketball leagues. The average age was 11.6 and included both boys and girls. In one youth league, the coaches and parents received no training, while in the other league, parents and coaches were trained together using a “mastery” approach to coaching youth sports, developed by Smoll and Smith, which emphasized personal improvement, giving maximum effort, having fun, sportsmanship, and supporting their teammates, as opposed to a “win at all costs” approach. This “mastery” climate in youth sports has already been proven effective in a previous study conducted by UW in 2007, where students who were coached by “mastery” coaches reported that they:

- Liked playing for their coach more
- Rated their coaches as more knowledgeable about the sport
- Thought their coach was better at teaching kids how to play basketball
- Had a greater desire to play for the coach again that following year
- Enjoyed their team experience more
- Believed that their parents liked the coach more

And now in the 2008 study, Smoll and Smith showed that when the parents were included in the “mastery” approach as well, performance anxiety and concentration difficulties on the court decreased, while enjoyment of the sport increased. A pre-season questionnaire in both leagues showed little difference in athlete stress levels, but by the end of the season, students in the league where their parents and coaches had been trained together reported less worry, stress, and performance anxiety. In contrast, athletes whose parents and coaches received no training at all reported that their anxiety had increased.

Says Smoll, “Fear of failure is an athlete’s worst enemy, and the sport situation can easily create this type of anxiety. This combined approach helps both parents and coaches to create a mastery-oriented climate. We don’t ignore the importance of winning, because it is an important objective in all sports. But we place winning in its proper perspective. As a result, young athletes exposed to the mastery climate were able to concentrate more, and they had less worries about their performance. Their bodies also reacted more positively. They were less tense, had fewer queasy stomachs, and they didn’t experience feeling tight muscles.”

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Parents who don't have access to this type of training don't need to worry. Smith and Smoll have previously co-authored a book to help parents navigate the world of youth sports called *Sports and Your Child: a 50 Minute Guide for Parents*, available from Warde Publishers. The book stresses the difference between developmental and professional models of sports, parental roles and responsibilities, combating athletic stress, sports and self-esteem, dealing with winning and losing, why children drop out of sports, how to behave at sports events, dealing with sports injuries, and getting along with your child's coach, among other things.

About the book, Smoll says, "We want to have parents involved in youth sports, but they need to understand their role. Both parents and coaches send powerful messages to a child, and those messages shouldn't be in conflict. All the good work of a skilled coach during the week can be undone in five minutes by an uninformed parent." And the message to all parents, according to Smith and Smoll, is that with some training, parents, coaches, and youth athletes can work together to become a winning team. - *By Kersten Campbell, Crosscut Seattle, April 28, 2008*

Kids, parents sometimes forget it's fun and games

Jay Anthony trailed the parents following the referee into the Circleville Park parking lot — just in case. Just in case the couple, upset with the official's calls, had something rude to say to him. An hour earlier, the referee ejected their son during a Town of Wallkill Soccer Club under-16 game for rough play. The player retaliated by taking off his jersey and throwing it in the ref's face. The player's mother went even further. In the parking lot, she pushed the referee, swinging her arms wildly, as a crowd gathered. This was almost two years ago. Anthony thinks things might have escalated even further if, by chance, a Town of Wallkill police cruiser hadn't rolled into the parking lot. The soccer mom took off on foot. Anthony and the referee stood together in shock. "It was very disappointing that something like that happened at our park," said Anthony, Town of Wallkill's president from 1997 to 2006. "I've seen players do that, but never a parent. It was quite embarrassing."

These days, youth sports officials — from travel soccer teams to Little League — are often left blushing because of behavior like this from not only parents, but coaches and players. It seems everyone has a horror story to tell.

Town of Montgomery Little League president Wayne Vetro has kicked a player out of the league for chasing another with a bat. He's seen a grandparent, upset about his grandson's playing time, instruct the child to sit on the mound in protest. Vetro suspended a manager for the season two years ago for a grabbing a player by the shoulder. "These aren't things that happen every year," said Vetro, president of the league for 22 years. "But things like this should never happen. I think parents just become very sensitive when their child is involved."

Vinny Roberto, 34, who coaches his son's Mamakating Little League minor team added: "Some of the parents and coaches, they actually get more fired up than the kids. They go bananas. I've seen a couple of times last year when they were climbing on the fences and yelling at umpires. I think these are people who didn't make the high school team when they were playing, trying to live through their kids."

Sure, incidents like these might be isolated, but this isn't why the kids play the games. Still, more and more incidents like these — from Monticello to Marlboro — are popping up. But why? "I wish I knew, I'd have a Ph.D.," said Paul Lloyd, who founded the Hudson Valley Polar Bears ice hockey team in 1997. "I don't mean to hang parents out to dry, but some can be very tough to deal with. The way they talk to referees and coaches is unacceptable."

According to David Czesniuk, director of operations at Boston's Center for the Study of Sport in Society, parents can act out for several reasons. Czesniuk subscribes to Roberto's theory. Yes, Czesniuk said, parents often live through their children's accomplishments on the field. If their kid doesn't perform well, doesn't make the team, doesn't play enough, etc., mom and dad's egos get bruised as well, maybe even more. That can be a problem. Today's youth scene is more pressurized, Czesniuk added, with specialization in one sport and parents looking for a scholarship. No matter how good their child is. "Years ago, sports were about community," Czesniuk said. "Now, a lot of times, it's different. Some of these sports runs peoples lives." To keep the peace, keep everyone in line, Czesniuk stresses leagues enforcing code of conducts. Everyone should sign them — parents, and many times, coaches and players also.

If a parent signs the contract and breaks the rules, he could face a sit-down with league officials to discuss the matter. Short- or long-term suspensions are also possible punitive actions. Anthony adopted a code of conduct shortly after soccer mom's mad dash in the parking lot. Her son was suspended for two years by the Eastern New York Soccer Association. Anthony could have appealed the ruling. He didn't. Anthony said the league's had very few incidents since.

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Monroe United Soccer Club implemented a code of conduct five years ago after some parents routinely harassed referees during games. Phil Summers, the team's director of coaching, said he and other board members also monitor games closely. If a parent becomes unruly, Summers or a board member will introduce themselves, and tell the parent to tone it down a notch. "There is a big referee shortage," Summer said, "and I think that's because they don't want to get paid \$30 to get yelled at. My daughter was a referee in high school, but she quit because of all the abuse she was taking."

Summers said the league has suspended parents, but the code of conduct works well. However, in the heat of the moment, when an aggressive parent is upset with a coach or ref, defusing the situation immediately is essential. "If a parent is upset with me after a game, I have a 24-hour rule," said Dwight Healey, a coach with the Hudson Valley Polar Bears. "I don't talk to them. It's important that they don't act too quickly, but also, that the coach doesn't act too quickly. That leads to bad things. I walk away and we can have a sit-down when everyone is calm." - *By Justin Rodriguez, The Times Herald Record, April 11, 2008*

Former high school pitcher hopes rules are changed to protect young arms

No way. Jason Koenig was not leaving this game. Koenig's baseball career at North Mason High School reached its peak — only moments before it disappeared. For nine innings, Koenig went pitch-for-pitch with Yelm, the state's top-ranked Class 3A team, and two future pro prospects. He had no plans to take himself out. Not after the fifth, when, while batting, a pitch drilled him so hard in the back he couldn't swing two innings later. Not after the top of the seventh, after throwing 97 pitches — on one day of rest after a relief appearance. Not after the top of the eighth, when his mother, Beth, grasped the chain-link fence behind the dugout and told coach Jay Hultberg, "Jay, he's at 117 pitches. He's done." Not even after the 132nd pitch, which landed past the scoreboard in left field for a three-run home run. Koenig threw 140 pitches in nine innings on April 27, 2001.

He never recorded another out. Instead, he joined the rapidly expanding ranks of adolescent pitchers who need arm surgery. Three years to the day later, Koenig sued the North Mason School District for negligence. Never before, his attorney says, has a pitcher sued his school district for pitching overuse. Koenig lost the lawsuit last month, but the courtroom debate illustrated the arguments that have raged for decades, from Little League to the big leagues, from dugouts to operating tables.

An epidemic

Orthopedic surgeons nationwide have called this their "mission" and their "quest." They have seen arm injuries claim too many pitchers, too young, to the point that James Andrews, a renowned Alabama-based orthopedist, has called it an "epidemic."

Between 1995 and 1998, Andrews performed an average of nine elbow surgeries per year on high-school students. Between 2003 and 2006, an average of 148 high-school students received the same surgery. He has seen a similar increase in shoulder injuries. Larry Pedegana, the former Mariners orthopedist, said he recently operated on patients as young as 12 for pitching-related injuries, something he never saw 10 years ago. New research by the American Sports Medicine Institute, which Andrews founded to prevent sports injuries, has provided some insight into the root of these pitching problems.

In a 2006 study of pitchers ages 14 to 20, the institute's biomechanics lab found that throwing 85 mph or faster, for instance, made a pitcher 2 ½ times more likely to have surgery. Competitively pitching for more than eight months a year created five times the risk for surgery. The study found that pitchers who "regularly threw with arm fatigue" — threw after they're tired — were 36 times more likely to have surgery. "When you get beyond fatigue, that's Mother Nature's way of saying that's enough," said Frank Jobe, orthopedic consultant for the Los Angeles Dodgers. "You can't fool around with Mother Nature."

The most common pitching-related surgery is Tommy John surgery, a reconstruction of the ulnar collateral ligament in the elbow that Jobe pioneered 34 years ago. Like slicing a tree trunk to see its rings, surgeons cut open the elbow and often see tiny abrasions and tears on the ligament — called "microtrauma" — that indicate previous overuse. And where the ligament is torn, it's often so frayed that the ends resemble cotton candy — a sign that the tear came from frequent overuse, not simply one wrong pitch. The more frequently a child pitches past his limit, the more likely something will tear as he gets older.

Glenn Fleisig, the chair of research at Andrews' sports medicine institute, often hears from youth and high-school coaches who aren't convinced. They don't have any pitch-count limits, they say, yet they have never had a kid need surgery on their watch. His retort: "Go ahead and give them cigarettes. They're not going to get cancer on your watch."

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A baseball jones

Koenig has played baseball as long as he can remember watching it, and he began pitching in the fourth grade. But before his junior year of high school, he would not be considered the classic problem profile outlined by Andrews. He never played in multiple leagues during the same season. He did not pitch in the winter, aside from 10 innings in a pair of holiday tournaments in 2000. At the end of his sophomore year, his fastball barely hit 75 mph. But before the start of his junior season, Koenig took a new approach to conditioning and mechanics. His fastball jumped to 84 mph, and he joined North Mason's starting rotation. "I come into the season, and I'm basically their horse," Koenig says. The pitches quickly piled up. He threw 102 pitches March 22, and only four days later, he threw 129. Koenig took the mound in 14 of North Mason's first 18 games, often closing the games he didn't start. All of his pitching was within the rules of the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association, which only dictate that a pitcher must rest two days after pitching more than three innings.

Koenig's season gained momentum starting April 11, when he threw 95 pitches against Fife. After a 58-pitch relief appearance on April 16, he threw 102 pitches against Lakes on April 20. After that game, a scout from the Cincinnati Reds talked to Koenig about working with him in the summer. Koenig's arm never made it that far. On April 25, he pitched two innings, though no one kept track of his pitches. Two days later, he threw more pitches than ever before, 140, in the nine-inning loss to Yelm. It capped a 16-day stretch in which Koenig threw about 425 pitches.

In the March trial, Koenig's attorney, Hal Hodgins, asked Hultberg, "Did you think at all, even a little bit, for a short time, that there might be any danger in Jason pitching more than 117 pitches, pitching another inning?" The coach replied with one word: "No."

Counting pitches

Before the first pitch of the major-league season 82 pitchers were on the disabled list with an assortment of tears, sprains and fractures. Pitching, baseball's most valuable commodity, is also its most fragile. Even 10 years ago, major-league pitchers often exceeded pitch levels that would be unthinkable today. In 1998, 15 pitchers threw at least 140 pitches in a game, and 28 pitchers averaged 105 pitches per start. In 2007, not a single pitcher threw more than 130 pitches, and only 13 averaged 105 a start.

Change arrived in the late 1990s, when the well-used arms of several young phenoms began to flame out. In 1999, Jazayerli developed a statistic called pitcher-abuse points. He theorized that it's not exactly the number of pitches that puts a pitcher at risk, but how many are thrown past fatigue. In 2002, Baseball Prospectus' Keith Woolner updated the formula after studying the effect high pitch counts have on even the most durable pitchers, and he found that fatigue usually kicks in at about 120 pitches. Using the updated formula, a 140-pitch start is eight times worse than a 120 and 64 times worse than a 110. "We watch everyone pretty closely when they get to 100 pitches," Stottlemyre says. Stottlemyre, who pulled his sons out of college when one threw 180 pitches in a game, doesn't think pitch counts should be limited to the mature arms in the majors. "They should become a factor in high school, and certainly at the collegiate level," he says. "There's just as good of a chance of overworking a pitcher, which might lead to a damaged arm."

Arm trouble

Jason Koenig always thought he was going to come back. Pain seared into his shoulder on the drive home from his 140-pitch start. The next day, he needed help simply putting on his suit coat before prom. But still he thought he would return to the field. The summer of 2001 was supposed to be his big break, with a spot in the starting rotation on a Seattle summer team. He didn't throw a single ball. He had surgery that November to repair a torn labrum, the ring of fibrous tissue that surrounds the shoulder joint, and a frayed rotator cuff, the network of muscles and tendons that stabilize the joint. The surgery left him with 12 percent less mobility in his right shoulder. After the surgery, pain in his elbow surfaced. Doctors say someday it will require surgery.

Each day, he discovered something new he couldn't do. He couldn't swim and when he couldn't play catch with his brother, he knew getting back on the mound was out of the question. "I was so mad," Koenig says. "This was all I've ever worked for. This has been my passion and my driving force." Koenig's parents saw his lowest point come when he took down all of the memorabilia hanging in his bedroom, and even boxed up all of his autographed cards. A game he used to love only reminded him of pain. "It was devastating," his mother, Beth, said. "He went through serious depression."

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The more he worked in a job with high-schoolers, the more he could not rest easy with the rule that allowed him to throw 140 pitches. “My conclusion was if I don’t try to do something, then every kid that gets hurt after this from being overpitched was partially my fault,” Koenig says.

He slides to the edge of his seat to make this point: “The problem is not that there are high-school baseball coaches who want to win. The problem is there are no rules to regulate those coaches.”

Little League’s step

Little League had seen enough numbers and heard enough horror stories. So in 2007, the world’s best-known youth sports league became the first to introduce mandatory pitch counts. Little League said it needs at least until the end of the 2009 season to determine what statistical effect the rule has had on injuries. But anecdotally, the league reports that many coaches have looked farther down the bench for pitching depth.

“You get more kids playing,” says Jim Bittner, Magnolia Little League president. “In the past you would keep pitching a dominant kid, and that’s how they get hurt.”

When young pitchers get hurt, Pete Wilkinson often ends up rehabilitating them at his youth baseball academy in Lynwood. Some never return. “The look in their eyes, if all of us coaches could see that when they throw their first pitch, it’d scare us all to death,” Wilkinson says. “These kids are absolutely petrified to throw again.”

Koenig has discovered a different life now - he’s married, has a career. “It’s way more fulfilling than playing baseball,” Koenig says. Yet that doesn’t make life without baseball any easier. He may never get to play catch with his kids, coach them in Little League, or show them the heat that made his junior season in high school one to remember. And forget.

“If I could have surgery and all the stars aligned and I could play ball, I would,” he says. “And I would pitch.”

- By Tom Wyrwich, *The Seattle Times*, April 5, 2008

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