

WHEN IN DOUBT, SIT THEM OUT

A heads-up about athletes and concussions

Coaches, trainers, athletes, parents and sports fans at all levels now recognize that a concussion can lead to lifelong debilitating injury. This growing awareness is good news.

A concussion is a traumatic brain injury caused by a blow to the head that jars the brain's soft tissue, which can hit the hard skull, resulting in a malfunction of the brain. A common fallacy is that someone has to be knocked unconscious to suffer a concussion, but loss of consciousness occurs in less than ten percent of cases.

A better measure of the severity of the injury is how long symptoms last, such as headaches, confusion, blurred vision, sensitivity to light and noise, difficulty concentrating, and other behavioral abnormalities. The longer the symptoms persist, the more severe the injury. Serious long-term health consequences can occur if not treated properly.

Massachusetts has recognized the dangers of concussion for its young athletes. A new state law on sports-related head injury passed last year that applies to all public middle and high schools and those playing under the rules of the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association.

THE LAW HAS FOUR MAJOR REQUIREMENTS:

1) athletes, parents, coaches, athletic directors, school nurses and team physicians must learn about the consequences of head injuries through training pro-

- grams and written materials;
- 2) athletes and their parents must inform coaches about prior head injuries at the beginning of a season;
- 3) athletes must be removed from play upon becoming unconscious or suffering a known or suspected concussion during a game or practice;
- 4) written certification from a licensed medical professional must be provided to return to play.

Thankfully, the notion of "toughing it out" is giving way to the common-sense approach of what's best for the health of the athlete. Coaches must now act accordingly: "When in doubt, sit them out."

Head injury is hardly confined to male athletes. The leading cause of concussion in females in high-school sports is soccer – a game in which girls sustain just as many concussions as boys. Cheerleading is risky, too, accounting for 65 percent of catastrophic injuries to high-school female athletes.

YOUNGEST AT RISK & NOT PROTECTED

Age is no barrier either. Elementary school youngsters (who aren't covered by the new law) who play little league or youth sports – and whose games may not have a health professional in attendance – are also at risk. These younger athletes can be more susceptible to injury and may take longer to heal.

Nor is concussion confined to organized sport. The Centers

for Disease Control lists the five leading causes of concussions as bicycling, football, basketball, playground activities and soccer. Note that two of these – bicycling and playground activities – occur mostly outside of organized sports, without coaches, trainers or health professionals present. Even a game at the playground can present risk.

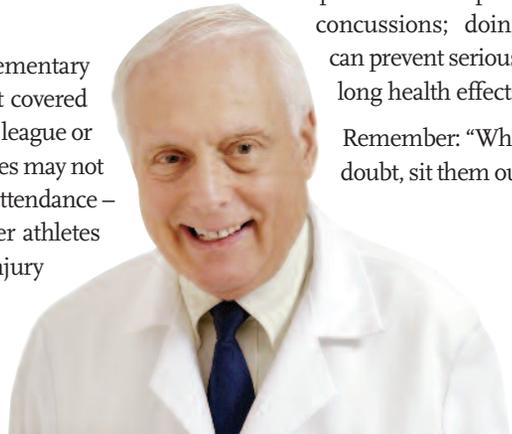
Coaches and parents, especially those of the youngest athletes, should be ever alert to head injuries. Awareness and education are the keys, and good resources are readily available.

The CDC (cdc.gov/concussion) has valuable information, and the Massachusetts Medical Society (massmed.org/sportssafety) offers a coach's guide that includes an evaluation card, guidelines for return-to-play decisions, and ways to decrease the risk of concussion.

Sports and recreation offer great benefits for people of all ages, and we should encourage participation. But it's prudent to

keep our "heads up" about concussions; doing so can prevent serious lifelong health effects.

Remember: "When in doubt, sit them out." ■



Alan B. Ashare, M.D., a physician at St. Elizabeth's Medical Center of Boston, is chairman of the Massachusetts Medical Society's Committee on Student Health and Sports Medicine, chairman of the MIAA Sports Medical Committee, and chairman of the Safety and Protective Equipment Committee for USA Hockey.