

As athletes take the field Concussion prevention is front and center

What a difference a year makes. As professional, collegiate and high school athletes return to the gridiron this fall, they will be competing under new rules that set out to protect athletes from the potentially long-term effects of concussion. Although long over due, the new rules are a dramatic improvement and send a clear message that we need to protect our young athletes.

Under pressure from former NFL players, researchers, Congress, the media, and advocates, the NFL has adopted new “return to play” guidelines and a prevention campaign that is in stark contrast to the league’s historical approach to dealing (or not dealing) with brain injury issues. The League is distributing a poster to players that clearly discusses concussion facts, symptoms, encourages player reporting, and acknowledges the potentially long-term effects of traumatic brain injury. In addition, the new rules require the permission of an independent neurologist before a player can return after a concussion.

Adding to the pressure placed on the NFL to address concussion, the NFL’s own study found that players and families reported Alzheimer’s and memory-related disease in players age 30 to 49 at a rate of 19 times the national rate for the same age group.

The NCAA began instituting policies and procedures last year by requiring all conferences to review fouls relating to “collisions that target a defenseless player.” (ncaa.org)

In January, the NCAA Playing Rules Oversight Panel instructed playing-rules committees to review policies for stopping play for injuries and to consider rules that may further prevent head injuries. A new rule this year is that an injured player must miss a play before being allowed to take part in the game again. And, if the player exhibits signs of concussion, they must be cleared by appropriate medical personnel (as determined by the institution) before returning to competition.

High school athletes may be at even greater risk of concussion. It is estimated that 137,000 high school athletes are concussed each year. Furthermore, according to a 2008 study by the Center for Injury Research and Policy at the Nationwide Children’s Hospital in Columbus, Ohio, an estimated 40% of high school athletes with concussions

return to play too early. High schools are now doing something about it.

The Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA) has implemented new concussion protocols. Eight sports will fall under these protocols beginning this school year.

According to the MHSAA website, “Any athlete who exhibits signs, symptoms, or behaviors consistent with a concussion (such as loss of consciousness, headache, dizziness, confusion, or balance problems) shall be immediately removed from the contest and shall not return to play until cleared by an appropriate health care professional.”

In addition, players sustaining a concussion cannot return to play that same day under any circumstance.

Lastly, the State of Michigan has added penalties for schools failing to follow these protocols including game forfeitures, school probation, and loss of playoff opportunities for multiple violations of the rules.

I love sport and I love competition. With changes like those of the NFL and in many high schools and colleges across the country, the hope is that the incidence and consequences of related brain injury are significantly reduced. Future rule changes, equipment enhancements, and advocacy will continue to be required to push us toward a culture that protects young athletes. ❖

*Written by Bill Buccalo, President
Rainbow Rehabilitation Centers
Copyright Sept. 2010 — Rainbow Rehabilitation Centers, Inc.*

*All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.
No part of this publication may be reproduced in any manner
whatsoever without written permission from Rainbow
Rehabilitation Centers, Inc. For information, contact the editor at:*

*RainbowVisions Magazine
Rainbow Rehabilitation Centers, Inc.
38777 Six Mile Rd., Suite 101, Livonia, MI 48152, USA
E-mail: rainbowvisions@rainbowrehab.com*