

Sobering Season

Sports Fatalities Put Medical Care in Spotlight

Text Jordan Bostic & Valerie Hunt

The 2008 high school fall sports season has thrust proper medical coverage into a national spotlight and prompted state legislatures to examine the issue. At least 12 high school football players have died since August, in addition to two youth-league football players and two soccer athletes.

Though (sadly) not out of line with fatality rates in recent years, this season – like last – is seeing more deaths stemming from indirect injuries like heat illness, said Fred Mueller, MD, director of the National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research.

“Over the years, [fatalities from] direct injuries were higher and indirect were lower,” Mueller said. “But now it’s going the opposite direction. There have definitely been changes to bring down the number of direct fatalities, but we still have the heat and we still have the heart problems.

“This means we still have work to do in educating people about those dangers.

“The number of heat strokes are a concern,” Mueller added. “If you look at the statistics since 1995, I think there are 33 deaths from heat stroke. That’s entirely preventable.”

Sad Reminder

Brian Robinson, MS, ATC, LAT, chair of the Secondary School Athletic Trainers’ Committee, said the rash of fatalities dramatically underscores the importance of developing and practicing an emergency action plan.

“If anything good can ever come out of [these deaths], it gives [athletic trainers] pause to think about and evaluate our own programs and to make sure we are as prepared as possible,” Robinson said. “What if this happened at our schools? Would we have been able to react?” Robinson said.

Robinson found the heat-related deaths particularly concerning. “We have kids in high school that are as big as college players. I think sometimes coaches forget that just because these boys are huge, it doesn’t mean they have the physiology of an adult.”

Getting Lawmakers’ Attention

Following a spate of deaths in its state – three athletes within a month – the North Carolina High School Athletic Association’s Sports Medicine Committee held an emergency hearing in October. Kevin Guskiewicz, PhD, ATC, offered expert testimony on the need for certified athletic trainers and called on the state to make funds available so high schools can be properly staffed. If schools can’t afford a full-time athletic trainer, Guskiewicz recommended suspending football, lacrosse, wrestling and soccer.

Oklahoma Rep. Joe Dorman launched a study in October to examine how the legislature can help protect athletes in his state, “whether it’s requiring coaches to have increased first aid and injury care training, properly checking equipment such as football helmets to make sure they are sized for the student properly, or providing enough funding for schools to ensure an athletic trainer is present at all practices and games.”

Ron Walker, ATC, and Dan Newman, ATC, provided information about athletic trainers’ education, skills and expertise.

Making a Difference

But the most convincing evidence is embodied by survivors – some of whom never realize they’ve had a close call, thanks to ATs’ intervention.

For example, Alicia Bonanza, 16, came close to death in September but was saved by the quick thinking of her athletic trainer. Bonanza, a soccer player in Hilton Head, N.Y., collapsed in the middle of a game Sept. 2. Carrie Rejewski, ATC, felt Bonanza’s temperature rising and noted a fast pulse, so she covered the girl with ice bags, concentrating on the neck, underarms, feet and behind the knees to cool her body and slow her heartbeat. Bonanza was diagnosed with Long QT syndrome.

Incidents such as these happen time and again, every year. It’s why experts increasingly point to athletic trainers as the most important part of youth sports safety.

In-Season Fatalities

- Taylor Haugen, 15, was playing for the junior varsity football team at Niceville High School in Niceville, Fla. when two opposing players sandwiched him. He collapsed into the arms of athletic trainer Andrea Lynch, MS, ATC, OTC, CSCS, who immediately recognized the signs of a serious internal injury. Despite surgery, Haugen died within hours of a liver laceration.

- Matt Gfeller, 15, took a hit to the chest during the fourth quarter of Reynolds (N.C.) High School’s season opener on a Friday night. By Sunday, Gfeller was dead. Surgeon Charles Branch Jr., MD, told the *Lynchburg News Advance* the force of the hit probably whipped Gfeller’s head backward, causing the brain to swell. Branch said the blow likely tore a cortical vein, which led to a blood clot on the brain.

- Atlas Fraley, a senior at Chapel Hill High School in Chapel Hill, N.C., was found dead in his living room on Aug. 12 after participating in an early morning football scrimmage. Fraley had been pulled from the game because of a severe headache and called 911 for help that afternoon. EMS came to Fraley’s home but did not transport him to the hospital. Later Fraley’s parents found their son dead on the floor. The official cause of death has not been determined.

- JaQuan Waller, 16, became the third football death in North Carolina within just three weeks, setting off alarm bells in the state capitol. The junior running back for Glen Rose High School in Greenville collapsed on the sideline after being tackled. Waller was brain dead by the next morning and eventually taken off life support. The medical examiner’s report showed Waller had suffered a mild Grade 1 concussion in practice two days before and died of Second Impact Syndrome. Waller’s initial concussion – first diagnosed during autopsy – was handled by the school’s “injury management specialist,” a teaching assistant named Bill Grimm. The Pitt County School System (where only one of six schools has a certified athletic trainer on staff) sus-

pended Grimm from his medical duties pending an investigation.

- **Ryne Dougherty**, 16, of Montclair (N.J.) High, died in October from a brain hemorrhage suffered in a JV game roughly three weeks after sustaining a concussion in practice.
- **Douglas Morales**, a junior at New Jersey's Cliffside Park High, was tackled during practice and collapsed on his way to the sidelines with athletic trainer Sean Gadino, ATC, PTA. Morales spent four days in a coma before dying. The preliminary cause of death was listed as a subdural hematoma.
- **Joseph Larracey**, a 16-year old lineman for Holliston High School in Millford, Mass., collapsed during a scrimmage. A *Milford Daily News* report said Larracey's EKG test suggested the fatal injury may have been heart-related, possibly from taking a hit to the chest.
- **Vinny Rodriguez**, of Boron, Calif., suffered head trauma during a game and underwent surgery to relieve swelling but succumbed to the injury four days later.
- **Alonzo Smith**, a senior at Liberty High School in Osceola County, Fla., died of a MRSA infection on Sept. 28.
- **James Wooden**, a 16-year old junior for the Barnwell High football team in Barnwell, S.C., died of complications nearly a week after suffering a heatstroke during football practice. The 6'5", 360-pound lineman had a core body tem-

perature of 108 degrees; he had been hospitalized two days for heat exhaustion after the first day of football practice.

- **Max Gilpin**, 15, of Louisville, Ky., died from a heatstroke that raised his core temperature to 107 degrees. Gilpin and another player on the Pleasure Ridge High School team both collapsed during sprints at the end of the practice. Both were hospitalized, but Gilpin's condition never improved. (The other player was released after two days). A criminal investigation is underway, after witnesses reported a football coach denying players water and yelling at them to keep going.
- **Patrick Allen**, 17, died on Aug. 14, two days after suffering heatstroke at home after football practice at Bakersfield Christian High School. The high temperature that day was 104 degrees with 25 percent humidity, according to the National Weather Service. The team had a light practice at 4:30 in full pads after practicing that morning in only shells.
- **Sean Fisher**, 13, of the Waldwick County Football Association in New Jersey, collapsed and died during non-contact drills in August.
- **Rashad Wallace**, 12, was practicing with the Pop Warner football league in Jacksonville, Fla., on Aug. 2 when he collapsed. As of Oct. 17, the Jacksonville Medical Examiner had not completed an autopsy.
- **Brandon Baker**, 14, collapsed while completing a mile-long jog at the end of practice as

a cool-down in Antelope, Calif. Autopsy results have not been released.

- **Jennifer Snyder**, 17, collapsed about 30 minutes into practice with the Glenbrook United club soccer team in Northbrook, Ill. She died less than two hours later at Glenbrook Hospital. The cause of death has not yet been determined.

Offseason Fatalities:

- **Jacheem Xavier**, 13, of Snellville, Ga. was a 6'1", 230-pound eighth-grader when he collapsed and died from complications of an enlarged heart after two hours of conditioning for the Gwinnett Football League.
- **Dylan Bradshaw**, 15, collapsed and died on May 28 during football practice at Northwood High School in Irvine, Calif. The official cause of death was congenital heart failure.
- **Ryan Gramberg**, 16, was participating in a football camp at Stevens High School in Rapid City, S.D., when he collapsed and later died at the hospital of hypertrophic cardiomyopathy.
- **John Liescheski**, 17, of Pius X High School in Lincoln, Neb., died during informal off-season condition sprints. The official cause of death is unknown, but preliminary findings suggested a potential heart problem.

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