

SPORTS

Hard-hitting sport balances glory and injury

DANIEL J. ROWE
THE EASTERN DOOR

Quarterbacks Alex Smith of the National Football League's San Francisco 49ers, Chicago Bears' Jay Cutler and Michael Vick of the Philadelphia Eagles did not finish games they started on Sunday.

The reason: concussions.

The three QBs joined eight other players forced to leave games because of head injuries Sunday.

If you play football, you're going to get hit. Part of the joy of the game is watching players hit and be hit.

With hitting, however, comes the inevitable truth of injury.

According to the Montreal Children's hospital's trauma concussion kit, approximately 35-40 per cent of more than 16,000 trauma cases at the MCH are related to sports, of which at least 1,000 have sustained concussions.

The reality of head injuries, most notably concussions, has hit the sport hard, and players, coach-



METRO CREATIVE GRAPHICS

es, and parents in football programs of all levels now have to answer what they are doing or not doing to protect their athletes, many of whom are children.

The call for education and awareness is paramount, according to the MCH's trauma centre.

"We're starting to call concussions 'mild traumatic brain injury,'" said director of trauma services Debbie Friedman at the MCH. "One of the reasons we're doing it is we, from a medical perspective, want to really accentuate the fact that it's not just a bang in the head,

that you toughen up and you suck it up, and go back and wear it as a badge of honour."

Friedman is also the director of the Canadian Hospitals Injury Reporting and Prevention Program (CHIRPP) and an assistant professor in the department of pediatrics

at McGill University.

"The brain is mobile within the skull," said Friedman. "It can move from side to side during a fall or a hit causing varying degrees of brain injury, so depending on the velocity and mechanism of the injury, there is no helmet that can entirely prevent a concussion because the head rests on a mobile neck.

"The only way you could probably do it (prevent concussion completely) is if you wore a helmet like the Knights of the Round Table, which includes a shoulder and immobilizes the neck."

The Chateauguy Raiders minor football program is well aware of the importance of guarding against concussions, and coaches suggested a number of ways players can prevent concussions.

AGGRESSION

The intensity of minor league sports can grow to unhealthy levels.

The Raiders football program is no different. Though not at the intensity level of its U.S. counterparts,

Continued on page 29

Two wins and a loss for Raiders squads

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Three Chateauguy Raiders football teams were in action Saturday in win or go home provincial playoff games.

The Midget AAA Raiders came off its regional championship win the week before to take the Presidents Cup 20-17 in a thrilling back and forth game against the Lanaudiere Rhinos at St. Leonard's Stade Hebert.

The Rhinos got the jump on the Raiders, scoring the game's first touchdown, but Chateauguy struck right back.

The Rhinos broke the half-time deadlock and went up by three early in the second half. The game stayed that way for the majority of the half until, with under a minute left, the Raiders scored a touchdown to win it.

"I loved it," said defensive lineman Dorian Lahache. "It was an awesome experience to have this summer."

The 17-year-old Lahache re-joined the Raiders this year after a six-year absence.

The Mosquito AAA Raiders won in Ile Bizard against the Vikings 56-12 in the provincial semi-finals on the same day.

The Mosquitos fought through a tough first quarter much like in the regional finals the week before.

"We were a little nervous at the beginning of the game, but settled down in the end of the first quarter," said coach Glenn Gilmore.

It was a solid all-around game from the Mosquitos, who now move on to play in the provincial finals against the Boucherville

Grizzlies, Sunday at 4 p.m. at Riverside Park in LaSalle.

"The whole team did their part to win," said Gilmore. "I am extremely proud of all my players. We will be ready for the championship game on Sunday, and I hope the Raider Nation will be there to cheer us on. These players are already champs in my eyes."

It was a much tougher day for the regional champion Atom

Raiders that pounded rival Sun Youth 42-8 a week before.

The Atoms lost 30-6 to the Lakeshore Cougars in Kirkland to end the season.

Some questionable officiating can be blamed for part of the result, but the opposing team's experience proved the toughest obstacle, said coach Robert Young.

"You could see that that team was pretty much all a second-year

team," he said. "You could see that they were a lot bigger, they were a lot faster."

At the eight and nine-year old Atom level the difference of one year can make a huge difference in terms of size, speed and skill.

The loss, however, was only the second of the season for the Atom Raiders who will return next season as regional champions.

"Like I explained to the kids,

you can't complain, you won your division, and you made it to the semi-finals of the provincial championships," said Young. "That's not something to be upset about. It's something you should keep your head up about because you did very well."

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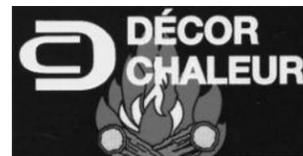
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Concussions

Continued from page 28

the Montreal Regional Football League produces intense rivalries, heated contests and tough players.

"Honestly, I think the concussions come in when the tempers start to flare," said former Bantam Raiders coach Steve Dion. "That's when the hits start coming in full force and they start leading with the helmet and into other kids' heads."

"I think sometimes concussions are very hard not to get, but I find, if you're losing, the hits become a little bit more intense ... someone really goes in to hurt someone."

Coaches say that the tempers start to become a problem in the Bantam to Midget levels –13-16 years old – which is why training players to be more disciplined at a young age is so important.

"You just have to coach them properly; it's all about discipline," said Young.

Friedman echoed this sentiment insisting that players, parents and coaches need to respect the game, and have "no tolerance for gratuitous violence."

Control of aggression is something that extends to the stands.

"The role that the parents play has to be a positive one so that they're not sitting in the stands yelling, 'Kill him. Bash him.' That's somebody's kid there," said Friedman.

AWARENESS

Multiple coaches involved with the Chateauguay Raiders football program mentioned awareness as key for players to avoid injuries.

Photos show 49er QB Smith getting hit in the back shoulder by St. Louis Rams linebacker Jon-Lonn Dunbar while Smith was falling backward.

Smith could not have seen it coming.

"We try and prepare them the right way to make sure when they're placed on the field what to look out for," said Atom coach Robert Young.

A number of Raiders coaches said that they teach their players to have their heads on swivels as it



DANIEL J. ROWE THE EASTERN DOOR

Education is the key in preventing serious injuries as much as possible in football.

were, aware of where all players are at all times so they can better brace for hits and protect themselves.

Football is different from hockey in that it's a collision sport, not a contact sport.

"In hockey, you're slowing down, you're anticipating the hit," said Peewee AA coach Todd Powell. "In football, you're blinded. You can only see what's directly in front of you, so if somebody is coming from either side it's a collision. You're not slowing down. You're colliding with somebody."

TECHNIQUE

It is not just those getting hit that can get concussions.

Players will avoid head injuries if they learn to tackle correctly at a young age.

"We teach them how to form tackle," said Young, who coaches players as young as eight. "(We teach) where to position your head, where to position your arms; that way, when you do make the tackle, you won't get hurt."

Leading with the helmet is illegal, but it is also dangerous. Mastering the mechanics of a proper tackle will drastically limit the amount of trauma to the head.

"If you hit with your head down there's more chance of concussion than if you hit with your

head up," said Midget coach Jim Petelle.

The Montreal Children's Hospital stresses this point.

"Technique, awareness, skill training is very important," said Friedman.

The young Raiders football players seem to know this.

Chase "Crack Man" McGowan, 14, plays receiver and slot receiver for the Raiders Bantam team. Though young, McGowan already has an awareness of what to do or not do when hitting and getting hit.

McGowan's is part of a generation of players that will grow up knowing more about concussions than any before.

"I would never give up football because of injuries," he said. "That's one of the reasons why I love it."

EQUIPMENT

The one advantage football players have is that the increase in equipment quality can protect players, as long as they pay attention when getting ready.

When asked whether he thinks he gets hit too hard sometimes, 10-year-old Raiders offensive lineman Eli Hamelin's answer was prompt.

"No," he said. "I have all the equipment on, and I don't think it

would hurt that much."

Parents also tend to feel more confident that their kids are protected due to the amount of gear they wear though concern is still there.

"When you see a big hit (it's concerning)," said Bronwyn Johns, whose 8-year-old son Rotetschenatie McComber plays offensive line for the Raiders Atom team. "But they've got the helmets, and I've played rugby with no helmet, so I guess it's like being afraid of a car accident. It could happen, but will I stop driving? No, but it does cross my mind every so often."

Being lackadaisical with equipment can be outright dangerous.

"If the chinstrap is not on properly and he gets hit, well he's going to get a concussion," said Young, who coaches McComber.

Coach Petelle added that a mouth guard that has been properly formed to the player's mouth is very important. This requires heating the mouth guard, so that it forms to fit each player's unique jaw.

McGowan has a specially designed mouth guard from his dentist made to accommodate his braces.

Friedman insisted that football players need to have well-fitting equipment. Hand-me-downs from older siblings are ill advised,

as they often don't fit perfectly.

Of course, even full, top of the line equipment could not stop the three NFL QBs from being concussed on Sunday.

EDUCATION

Football has been at the forefront among sports in educating trainers, players and coaches on the realities of head trauma.

Programs like the Chateauguay Raiders have addressed the seriousness of concussions and do not allow players back on the field unless they have a note from a doctor clearing them, according to coach Petelle.

This response is welcome news to the children's hospitals. "What we're really trying to do is get the message out to educate people what is a concussion, how do you prevent a concussion, but also how do you recognize it, and how do you make sure you don't play through the injury," said Friedman.

Smith and Cutler both played through their injuries Sunday, which is an absolute "no" according to doctors.

Friedman mentioned a number of times the importance of stopping activity when head injury occurs. The majority of concussions require 10-14 days of rest for recovery, but some are much more complicated and require longer respites.

At the recent Raiders' playoff games, a trainer immediately entered the field to check any player who had been hit hard to make sure that players did not suffer head or other injuries.

"Something really does happen when there is a concussion," said Friedman. "If concussions are not recognized and managed properly, the consequences can be significant and, in some cases, can be long lasting."

There are a wealth of factors that can affect the severity of a concussion.

For more information on head trauma, prevention and treatment, visit the Montreal Children's Hospital head trauma website at <http://www.thechildren.com/trauma/>.

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