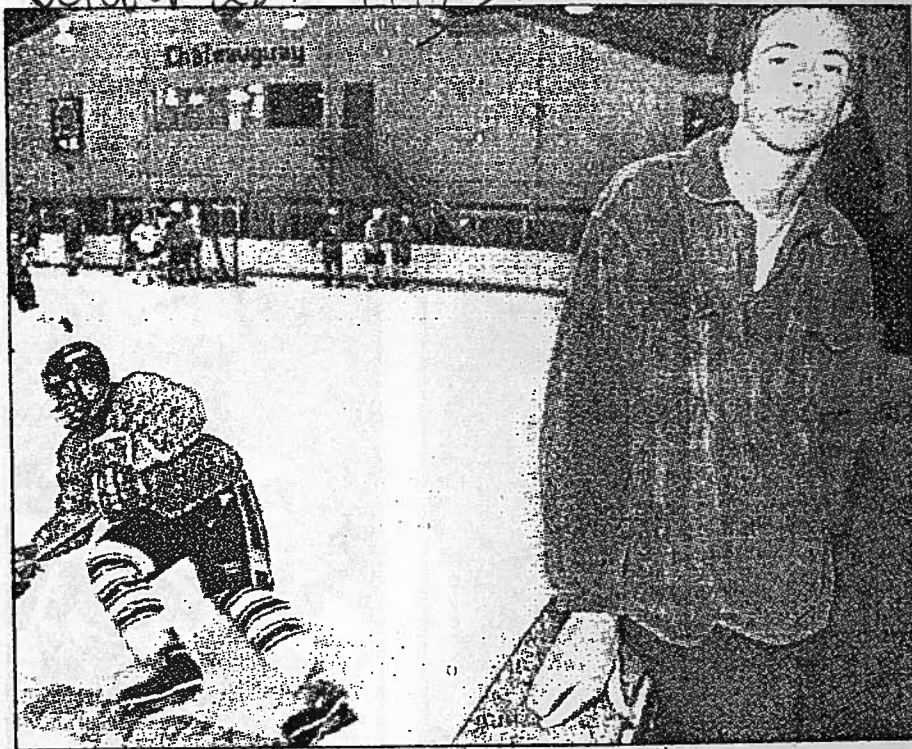


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ALLEN McINNIS, GAZETTE

Andrew Beaudoin has played since he could walk. Now, he's just watching.

Player sidelined for his own safety

Sporting teen is taking it easy after his third head injury as evidence mounts that repeated blows to the head can have a cumulative and damaging effect.

SUSAN SCHWARTZ

The Gazette

It was a playoff game and his Chateaugay soccer team was down 1-0, so when 16-year-old Andrew Beaudoin got the ball, he started running up the sideline - fast.

It was raining that early September day, the winds were high and the LaSalle pitch where they were playing was wet and slippery. Andrew was tackled at the legs - a legal tackle - and went flying. He'd learned from his coach how to tumble properly, so he rolled with his shoulder as he fell. Still, he landed first on his neck, then on his head. Next thing he knew, he woke in the crash room in the emergency department of the Montreal Children's Hospital. "I remember tingling in my arms. I felt like I had been hit by a truck. My head hurt and I was dizzy." He was confused, his vision was blurred and he had numbness and weakness on one side.

He had no memory of the accident. Seven weeks later he still hasn't. Because of how he'd been hit, it was thought at first that he had a leg injury; his coach and his father carried him off the field. In fact, he had a mild spinal-cord injury, caused by his landing on his neck - as well as a mild head injury. But it was not the first head injury he'd had playing soccer. Or the second.

"The first concussion, I got hit with a ball in the right temple during a game in the summer of '96," he said. "I was knocked out. I don't remember it. I stopped playing soccer for six weeks. I got a cleat in the head (the) first game (I was) back and was out a little longer. That winter I played hockey and was fine. Then I hurt my head really badly in September."

Debbie Friedman, program co-ordinator of the Head and Spinal Cord Trauma Program at the Children's and one of the people who looked after Andrew, said: "There was a lot of concern, because of the repeated head injuries, that he was at risk for developing post-concussion syndrome."

Post-concussion syndrome refers to symptoms that may develop following even a minor head injury and persist - especially headaches, dizziness, nausea and sleep disorders. Symptoms can also include fatigue, behavioural changes like irritability and restlessness, as well as difficulty with concentration, attention span, judgment and memory.

When Andrew was discharged on a Tuesday 36 hours after being admitted, he was keen on getting right back to school. Classes had just started at Howard S. Billings High School in Chateaugay, where he's an honour student in his final year. "Then we got home," Andrew said, "and my head was still very sore. I stayed home the rest of the week. Monday I tried to go to school

and said I had fallen asleep. Even the sound of the bell going off didn't wake me up. I said: 'Come get me' to my dad. I was just so tired."

Andrew had trouble focusing, Friedman said, and reading was hard for him. When we met, three weeks after his injury, he was still suffering from headaches, was still getting dizzy when he stood up quickly. "I know I can't concentrate as well or focus," he said.

Teachers were co-operative and understanding, said his mother, Lois, and Andrew's school program was modified for a time. His mother recalled that with his previous injuries it had taken a while for the vision problems and the headaches to resolve themselves.

By the seventh week after the injury, Andrew said he felt better, that his vision had improved, his concentration was back up to speed and

he was carrying a full school load.

At a lean, strong six feet, Andrew looks every bit the athlete he is: he has played hockey practically since he could walk and soccer since he was 8. Last winter he played for two hockey teams - his school team and a city team - and spent up to two hours daily, six days a week, on the ice.

"I'm kind of a jock," he said. Someone who likes the thrill of competition. And an aggressive player, he added, with a temper. Which is why he'll be watching hockey this season from the sidelines.

"Even if I were physically OK, I'd be mentally afraid of getting hurt. If I can't play the way I have played all my life, I don't want to play," he said. He might go back to hockey next year, he says, but he's not planning on playing soccer again.

Until not long ago, minor head injuries were considered relatively inconsequential. But those in the know now believe that even minor-to-moderate concussions can have important consequences, Friedman said. Magnetic resonance imaging, which can detect subtle changes, has shown scarring to areas of the brain that have been previously bruised, even in head injuries considered relatively minor.

What is also known now is that the effect of repeated head injuries can be cumulative, which is why there was concern about Andrew's amnesia following his accident, she said.

Almost 300 children are admitted each year to the Children's with a diagnosis of minor head injury; more than four times that many are seen in the emergency room for head injuries.

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Susan Schwartz's column returns next week

The 'invisible syndrome'

INJURY

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Guidelines of Friedman's program make physical activities such as gym, contact sports or any other strenuous activity off-limits for at least four weeks after an injury. If a child is symptom-free after four weeks - that means no fatigue, headache or dizziness - then a gradual return to physical activity is permitted.

"Some people feel we're too rigid but a good percentage of the children need the time," Friedman said. "We have observed that there can be subtle changes in balance, co-ordination and reaction time that make them more vulnerable to a second head injury. There can also be fatigue, headaches and poor concentration that predispose them to a second injury. We also believe that they need the time to heal, to come back to themselves completely."

The persistent headaches, fatigue, attention problems or distractibility that may plague young people after a head injury can mean their school programs have to be adapted: a gradual return to school, for instance, or reduced homework until a regular schedule can be managed.

Most of the time, symptoms resolve within days or weeks. But 10 to 15 per cent of these young athletes have residual effects, effects that may even be lifelong, Friedman said: attention problems, concentration problems, an inability to learn or organize. "The symptoms can persist so that everything - their school performance, their socialization, interaction with peers - can be affected."

She wants young athletes, their coaches and their parents to understand the potential seriousness of head injuries. "I've seen kids after games who were confused, disoriented, dizzy, with impaired vision, having difficulty with concentration and memory: in some cases they don't even remember having played the game they just played."

Yet there are those who ignore their symptoms for fear they'll be considered wimps or that they'll be removed

from competition. Some, adolescents particularly, believe they're invincible. This pressure, from their coaches, from their peers, from within and sometimes even from overzealous parents, can cause them to return to competition too soon - without realizing the implication of what they're doing.

"It's the responsibility of the coach to say: 'Anyone who hits his head or neck should report it, not cover it up,'" Friedman said. "It's important to get players to own up to their injuries and for their coaches to be made aware of the potential significance of minor injuries. They should err on the side of caution - and give parents the same message."

"I can't go home with them. You don't look physically impaired after a week, which is why minor-to-moderate head injuries are often referred to as the invisible syndrome."

"We really appreciate professional athletes who are coming forward and talking about their experiences. Their coming forward heightens the awareness of players and coaches. And parents who are better informed can also help kids and coaches."

Former National Hockey League player Brett Lindros and Harry Carson, who was a linebacker for the New York Giants, are among athletes who have spoken publicly about the impact their head injuries have had on their lives. "In the NFL, you're taught and you're expected to play with injury, play with pain," Carson said.

Lindros added: "With brain injury being invisible, it is sometimes disregarded by athletes and coaches."

Andrew Beaudoin has done all the right things. He stayed away from sports for four to six weeks after his injury, just as he had been instructed to. He has good family support from involved parents. School authorities have been co-operative. However, he could still suffer from the cumulative effects of his injuries.

"The goal is to increase awareness of head injuries and the significance of repeated head injuries," Friedman said. "Coaches need to be careful not to lose perspective. It's a game. Yes, it's important. But a decision may impact on the future."