

Reporter debates helmet safety



By Curtis Wichmer
Staff Reporter

We all know and love the game of football. From diving catches to hard hits, football is a very entertaining game — but it can come at a deadly price to the players. In the NFL, it seems like an injured player is helped off the field at least once every game. While suffering an injury is very common within the game, there is no injury more dangerous than one to the head. Time and time again, athletes are injured by a sharp blow to the helmet, sometimes causing them to lose consciousness. To maintain the safety of its players, the NFL has investigated the issue of head injuries and found most are caused by helmet-to-helmet collisions.

To counteract the ever-climbing number of head injuries, the NFL continually pours funds into programs designed to keep players safe. Various helmet and padding designs are drafted, tested and redrafted to help accomplish this goal. Every year, the NFL comes out with updates to the current equipment, promising the equipment will reduce injuries and, every year, players continually are injured through helmet-to-helmet contact. During the 2011-12 season, Pittsburgh Steelers linebacker James Harrison made helmet-to-helmet contact with Cleveland Browns quarterback Colt McCoy. McCoy received a concussion and was knocked unconscious during the play — to this day, he has no recollection of the hit. Fortunately, McCoy is fine now and still playing football. Unfortunately, he is not the only athlete to receive a head injury in this manner.

But how do these injuries keep happening if the NFL constantly is improving the safety of its equipment? What if making the helmets safer actually is making them more dangerous?

Football helmets are designed to have a padded interior and a thick,

hard outer shell. The helmet protects the brain, the most important body part of a football player. The helmet is the strongest, most protective piece of equipment — and the most dangerous. The protection offered by the design of the helmet has become so powerful that it is now less of a protection and more of a weapon. Time and time again, defensemen lead their tackles with their helmets. This is not incredibly dangerous for the player being tackled — until that player recoils and drops his head in preparation to absorb the hit. This is when helmets collide, the person tackled is critically injured and the defenseman comes out of the collision just fine.

Why is this? How does the person leading the collision come out unscathed? Helmet-to-helmet contact works like a Newton's cradle, those hanging lines of marbles you often see on office desks. When contact is made, the full force is transferred from the person making contact to the recipient. In the same way, McCoy suffers from amnesia, and Harrison walks away unharmed.

Although the shock of the impact plays a role in concussions, there is mounting evidence that suggests the sudden rotation of the skull and brain in helmet-to-helmet contact is another cause of concussion-related injury. Several tests conducted at Stanford University suggest this danger is real, and the NFL's football helmet tests don't account for it.

Independent research has shifted its focus from adding to the strength of the helmet, and instead is looking into how to prevent the sudden rotation of the brain. A 2012 Popular Science article featured an experimental helmet designed to combat these sudden rotations. When the helmet is hit with a sharp blow, the helmet itself rotates, relieving the stress and force that otherwise would be applied to the skull and brain. Steps have been taken to present the helmet design to the NFL, and with any luck, the NFL will be able to incorporate the new helmet design — or at the very least, if the design isn't quite up to the NFL's standards, it will incorporate the concept of reducing the stress placed on the brain.

As more athletes continue to suffer brain injuries because of football-related accidents, the demand for proper protection is crucial. Hopefully, with new designs and a greater focus on the protection of the brain, football will become a safer sport for players — amateur and professional — across the nation.

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