

# Coaches, students call sports injuries the norm

By Ralph R. Echlin  
staff writer

It's easy to say, as coaches have said for eons, that "injuries are part of the game."

Then along comes an accident like the one sustained last week by Mike Utley of the Detroit Lions, who was taken off the field with a spine injury and was later diagnosed as paralyzed.

Somewhat, words don't seem to compensate when a player gets hurt that critically.

Although injuries like Utley's are rare, a potpourri of lesser wounds are endemic to sports in general, some more than others.

COMBINE THAT WITH concerned parents, litigation run amok, increasing popularity of sports and high school athletics and it's no surprise coaches are preaching everything from the value of year-round conditioning to falling correct—all in the interest of minimizing injury.

"You've got to work hard," said Detroit Country Day footballer Nathan Johnson. "That's the best way to prevent injury. Injuries are a part of the game. If you're going to be a football player, you have to take into account that that's a possibility."

"Anytime you play a game, there's an opportunity to be injured," said Bob Atkins, Wall Lake schools athletic director.

"It's like driving an automobile," said Darrell Harper, Southfield-Lathrup High School athletic director and football coach. "There's a certain amount of risk involved."

Harper recalled Utley's mishap a "freak injury, an accident. It's like getting hit by lightning."

So far, similar lightning hasn't struck Southfield-Lathrup athlete, Harper said, but he remembers sev-

en or eight football knee injuries in the last 15 years, two shoulder injuries and two broken ankles.

Harper said coaches these days teach the "safe" way to make contact, as opposed to cut blocking, butt blocking, spearing and head tackling.

Birmingham Groves High School athletic director Bill Rankin agreed. "We spend a great deal of time telling kids not to put their head in on a tackle or on a block," he said. "(And) we stay away from kids' legs. Any professional high school coach would never (allow) that kind of thing."

A common misconception is that football is the most likely sport in which student athletes get injured, but coaches and athletic directors report an unexpectedly high casualty rate on the soccer field. "The thing is that football gets so much publicity," Atkins said. "There's more of an awareness there (of the risk of injury). I think people are surprised at the severity of some of the injuries in soccer."

"The game is becoming rougher," Harper said. "We've had more soccer injuries this year than in football," Rankin said, "much more." This abundance of injury, he added, can be traced to the lack of protective equipment and the nature of the game. "Everything is played from the waist down," he said.

AS HIGH SCHOOL athletics evolved in the 1980s, a few schools were sued because of injuries to athletes. The resulting risk of litigation led many school districts to hire ath-

letic trainers. "It's really just caught on in the last five years," Atkins said. "A trainer is an insurance policy."

Part-time Seaholm High School trainer Bill Watson was one of the first. "When I started in '81 I think I was the only trainer in the area," he said.

Britta Ottoboni, West Bloomfield High School's full-time trainer, was hired in 1988. Like most trainers, Ottoboni has college training in her profession, and is certified by the National Athletic Trainers Association.

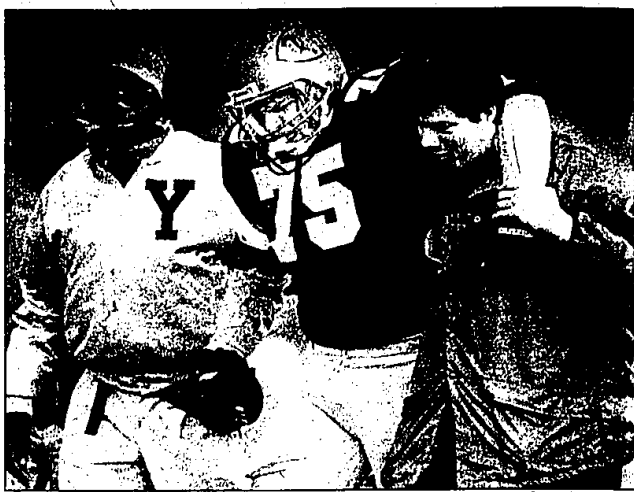
She said sprained ankles are the most prevalent injury in sports, but the inventory includes blown knees, dislocated shoulders, broken fingers, back problems and more.

Although a large part of any trainer's job consists of treating injuries, prevention is truly where it's at. Most trainers stress year-round conditioning, i.e. exercise, but, as any adult knows, convincing a teenager to act in a certain way isn't easy.

"The hardest thing to tell kids is that conditioning is good for them," Ottoboni said. "They just want to see how much they can bench press."

Trainers are generally on duty for all home games, and some schools have a doctor and ambulance waiting nearby for football matches. But it's not easy to cover everything. Wall Lake schools alone offers 23 different sports.

With the popularity of athletics increasing, a full-time trainer has a lot of ground to cover. "This place is quite the zoo," Ottoboni said.



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

Athletic injuries were placed in the spotlight 11 days ago when Detroit Lions offensive lineman Mike Utley fell on his head and became a paraplegic. Here Rich Bertrand of Ypsilanti High School is helped from the field after hurting himself in a game against Birmingham's Brother Rice last week.

## Hills police officer a new graduate

Farmington Hills police Sgt. Gary Hawald is a new graduate.

The 13-year department veteran graduated Nov. 7 from the Northwestern University School of Police Staff and Command. He is as-

signed to the operations bureau as a shift supervisor.

Hawald has a bachelor's degree from Oakland University and is working on a master's degree in public administration at the University

of Detroit.

Farmington Hills deputy police Chief Mini Spencer, inspector Richard Niemisto and Lt. Dennis Rochford represented the police department at graduation ceremonies.



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