

HEAD-DOWN CONTACT & SPEARING IN FOOTBALL

In April 2004, the National Athletic Trainers' Association published a position statement titled, "**HEAD-DOWN CONTACT and SPEARING IN TACKLE FOOTBALL.**" The position statement listed twenty-four (24) recommendations to minimize the risk of cervical spine injuries in tackle football. Of those 24 recommendations, 17 relate to coaching and the proper technique to minimize the risk of catastrophic cervical spine injuries. **All administrators and coaches should review these recommendations to ensure their football program is doing everything possible to minimize the risk of cervical spine injuries.**

1) HEAD-DOWN CONTACT IS THE PRIMARY CAUSE OF CATASTROPHIC CERVICAL SPINE INJURIES.

2) INTENTIONAL (SPEARING), AND UNINTENTIONAL HEAD-DOWN CONTACT, CAN BOTH RESULT IN CATASTROPHIC CERVICAL SPINE INJURIES.

3) EVERY TIME A PLAYER MAKES CONTACT IN THE HEAD-DOWN POSITION HE RISKS PARALYSIS FROM A CATASTROPHIC CERVICAL SPINE INJURY.

4) EVERY PLAYER IS AT RISK WHEN THEY MAKE HEAD-DOWN CONTACT, even though catastrophic cervical spine injuries occur more to defensive players.

5) EQUIPMENT DOES NOT PREVENT CERVICAL SPINE INJURIES CAUSED BY HEAD-DOWN CONTACT.

6) INJURIES RESULTING FROM HEAD-DOWN CONTACT ARE PREVENTABLE BY USING PROPER TECHNIQUE.

7) MAKING CONTACT WITH THE SHOULDER AND/OR CHEST, WHILE KEEPING THE HEAD UP, GREATLY REDUCES THE RISK OF CATASTROPHIC CERVICAL SPINE INJURIES.

8) COACHING, OFFICIATING, AND PLAYING TECHNIQUE MUST FOCUS ON REDUCING HEAD-DOWN CONTACT, regardless of whether it was intentional or not.

9) COACHES MUST TEACH, DEMONSTRATE AND PRACTICE MAKING INITIAL CONTACT WITH THE SHOULDER AND/OR CHEST WHILE KEEPING THE HEAD UP.

10) **PLAYERS MUST BE TAUGHT THAT INITIATING CONTACT WITH THE FACE MASK IS A VIOLATION OF THE RULES AND PLACES THE PLAYER IN A POSITION THAT INCREASES HIS RISK OF CERVICAL SPINE INJURY.**

11) **EVERY SCHOOL AND COACHING STAFF MUST IMPLEMENT, AND CONVEY TO PLAYERS, A PHILOSOPHY THAT HEAD-DOWN CONTACT IS DANGEROUS AND IS NOT PERMISSIBLE AT ANY TIME.** Any time a player is observed lower his head to make contact it must be corrected immediately.

12) School administrators and coaches must realize there will be turnover in coaches on a somewhat regular basis. **NEW COACHES MUST BE EDUCATED, AND EXISTING COACHES REEDUCATED, AS TO THE PHILOSOPHY PROHIBITING HEAD-DOWN CONTACT AND THE APPROPRIATE TEACHING METHODS TO MINIMIZE THE RISK OF CATASTROPHIC CERVICAL SPINE INJURIES.**

13) **CORRECT BLOCKING, TACKLING, AND BALL CARRYING TECHNIQUE MUST BE TAUGHT AT THE EARLIEST ORGANIZED LEVEL OF FOOTBALL.**

14) **At least TWO (2) EDUCATIONAL SESSIONS PER SEASON (one at the beginning of the season and one at the midpoint of the season) SHOULD BE CONDUCTED** to ensure players understand, and appreciate, the risk of making head-down contact, regardless of intent. Inviting parents to these educational sessions may further decrease the risk of catastrophic cervical spine injuries.

15) **ALL ATHLETES SHOULD HAVE AVAILABLE A YEAR-ROUND, SUPERVISED NECK STRENGTHENING PROGRAM TO PROVIDE STRENGTH AND ENDURANCE TO THE NECK.** It must be remembered that strength is a secondary factor in cervical spine injuries, with head-down contact being the primary factor.

16) **COLLECTING DATA on all catastrophic cervical spine injuries is important to reducing such injuries in the future.**

17) **EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS regarding head-down contact should include the use of television, radio and print media.**

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