

### HEADING: Proper technique is key to safety

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caused by proper heading of the ball.”

That tracks with the experience of the Lady Outlaws head varsity soccer coach, Thomas Draxler.

“I think players should be trained on proper heading sooner than later, because the sooner a player learns how to head right, the safer she will be,” Draxler says. “Heading is a way of striking the ball when it’s in the air. I say ‘striking’ because it’s an important distinction from ‘being struck by.’ For example: ‘Mary struck the ball with her head toward the corner of the goal’ (no concussion). As opposed to, ‘Kelly was struck in the head by the ball while attempting to block a shot’ (certainly a concussion).”

Draxler has seen some concussions in his 10 years as a coach. Only one of them was caused by heading — improperly.

“I haven’t seen a concussion from correct heading of the ball,” he said.

“When you strike the ball properly with your head, you are pushing forward through the ball with more energy than the ball has coming at you,”

the coach explained. “In that way, your head continues in one direction, while the ball gives way and launches off in a direction different from its initial flight. If you are timid about a header and you don’t push forward through the ball with adequate energy, then it’s your head that ends up being launched in a different direction, or being stopped in its tracks, and that’s one circumstance when the ‘vigorous shaking of the brain’ (that causes concussion) occurs.”

Draxler does not absolve heading entirely. He notes that soccer concussions, when they occur, are often the result of collisions. So two players going up to head the ball at the same time are at risk for that reason.

“(Heading) certainly opens the door for collisions — there’s no denying that,” he said.

But that, he believes, is an argument for more training, not for avoiding heading. He is concerned that bans on heading at early ages may do more harm than good. Not only does early training teach proper technique — it also instills good judgment as to when to go up for a header and when it’s too risky.

“It’s not the experienced soccer players who are getting concussions,” Draxler noted. “It’s the inexperienced ones.”

He’s seen knee-to-head

collisions when a goalie comes out to make an aggressive challenge. That’s a recipe for concussion. And concussions also come from players striking their head on the turf.

While heading may not be a lead culprit in soccer concussions, it’s not entirely off the hook.

The University of Washington analysis notes that “heading the ball, however, is not without consequences. A player may head the ball many times during practice sessions and about eight times during a game. Many players at the 1993 US Olympic Festival experienced headaches after heading the ball. These headaches lasted from a few seconds to several days ... (and) it is unknown if repeated low-intensity impacts, like those that occur when the ball is headed, make players more susceptible to later impacts.”

Since no sport is entirely without risk, and no player who loves the game is inclined to give it up on the mere chance of injury, what should players, coaches and parents do to help student-athletes stay safe as possible on the soccer pitch?

Helmets or headbands are sometimes seen as preventative measures — but it’s not clear that they have any beneficial effect. A helmet or headband can protect from a sharp blow, but it doesn’t



PHOTO BY JERRY BALDOCK

Nina Horner heads the ball — properly — in competition.

do anything to mitigate the violent shaking that causes concussion.

It seems that the best preventative measures are for players to learn and practice

proper technique, warm up their bodies appropriately, and play within themselves so that they don’t sustain collisions from reckless play.

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