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Easy to Administer Concussion Testing Has Pelham Parents Encouraged

By Alex Wolff

With new light being shined every day on the effects of concussions, high schools across New York State including PMHS have taken a hands-on and proactive approach to prevention and diagnosis.

An athletic trainer is often present at games sanctioned by the Pelham School District and some sports even have a team doctor on the sidelines.

But, what about youth sports? Every weekend and several weeknights elementary and Middle School athletes are taking to the fields, courts and rinks throughout Pelham with no athletic trainer or doctor in sight.

To curb that problem, Pelham Youth Hockey, Football and Lacrosse have been participating in a study being run in conjunction with the NYU Langone Medical Center to gauge the effectiveness of a new, easy to administer, vision test that allows non-medically trained volunteers to test kids on the sideline, and make sure they don't return to play too soon after sustaining a head injury.

Coordinating the study in Pelham is Dr. Arlene Silverio, a resident of Pelham who is a mother of four and has seen her fair share of concussions as an emergency room pediatric physician at Cohen Children's Hospital. While Dr. Silverio noted that concussions are fairly rare at the youth level, she stressed that it is important to keep the kids off the field until they have recovered.

If this study is successful, volunteers testing children who have been hurt could be able to help parents make decisions whether their children should continue to play.

And the results of the study are promising.

"The issue with being hit a second time is that then you're at risk for a longer recovery and a more severe injury," said Dr. Silverio who coordinated the study with Pelham Hockey two years ago and added the other sports this past season.

The study focused on whether a battery of tests—King-Devick, Tandem-Gates, and a Standardized Assessment of Concussion—could be an effective means of testing for concussions. The answer appears to be yes, but perhaps just as important, the battery of tests could be administered by a group of Pelham parent and high school volunteers.

As part of the testing, athletes were encouraged to undergo baseline tests before their seasons began. PMHS senior Max Lahn served as the student coordinator and rounded up high school students—many seeking to fulfill their community service requirement—to help test the kids.

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Pelham elementary and Middle School students have been administered three tests:

King-Devick Vision Test

The King-Devick test consists simply of four flashcards, each with numbers on it, which must be read, in order, by the patient. With each card, the numbers get more difficult to read. The first one has arrows on it pointing to the next number, the second does not. The numbers become more scattered, and farther apart through the progression. Athletes are timed during the test and their score is recorded.

Tandem-Gates Balance Test

A second component is the Tandem-Gates balance test, in which the athletes walk back and forth on a straight line four times, toe-to-heel. Again, the baseline time is recorded for future reference.

Standardized Assessment of Concussion

The Standardized Assessment of Concussion is the more traditional of the concussion testing. It is cogni-

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tive in nature, and athletes are asked to recall the month, the day, repeat numbers in order told to them, and remember words. A score is compiled and retained.

"It's super easy to learn how to do it," said Mr. Lahn. "Once you know how to do it, it takes like five minutes to do all three tests."

On the Sidelines

More than 500 Pelham athletes were administered baseline testing in the two years of the study. Dr. Silverio has held onto the data and a group of parents has been trained to administer the followup testing on the sidelines. Coordinating for girls' youth lacrosse was Kristin Barsanti, Louise Kelly for Pelham Youth Football; Kathleen Rosenberg for boys' youth lacrosse and Cathy Mazzaro has helped for hockey and lacrosse.

When coaches or parents watching the game saw a possible head injury, the kids went through the testing on the sidelines. The testers themselves don't make a judgment as to whether the child can return to the field. If a parent is witnessing the test, the parent can make the decision or leave it to the coach.

Both the King-Devick and Tandem-Gates tests have shown that they can illicit further symptoms such as dizziness or nausea. If those are apparent, it may be obvious that there is a head injury.

All the results of the sideline testing are reported to Dr. Silverio, who compares them to the baseline scores. After her analysis she may recommend that the athlete get checked out by a doctor.

In the Yard

With parents undergoing the training, the concussion testing can be administered in other situations, not just the athletic fields.

Even without baseline testing, the propensity for the tests to elicit symptoms means that concussions, which can occur in every day situations, can potentially be diagnosed at any time.

"If a child falls down or off of a swing, parents can still test their kids. It's ubiquitous. It doesn't have to be done just in sports," said Dr. Silverio.

Raising Awareness

Perhaps the most tangible piece of the study is the awareness factor. Where years ago, seeing stars was just a part of the game, now more and more people know what to look for.

"The side benefit is that it raises awareness for the entire community," said Ms. Kelly. "In hockey, you definitely saw that. Parents and coaches knew more about it. I wanted the same thing for football. I felt strongly about it."

"A lot of times I was at the game when my son got a concussion. I watched the hit, and then he went back in. I don't think there was awareness, and I don't think he knew. We're educating even children about what to look for," said Ms. Barsanti, whose kids have suffered concussions and who thinks she herself has had as many as five or six in her lifetime. "I think it's really good for building awareness. If you see stars, it's an event."

With awareness may come peace of mind.

"The fear is much greater than the actual risk," said Dr. Silverio, who mentioned that issues like obesity pose a much larger public health risk than concussions. She said that if a youth sports program has some assessments such as King-Devick and can say,"we have a protocol," the result will be: "you will get more kids to play."

Ahead of the Curve

While many communities are beginning to put some protocols in place for youth sports, Pelham's association with NYS Langone decisively puts the Town on the forefront of concussion protocol.

Throughout the past few years quite a few events have been held to educate the community about concussions in addition to the baseline testing and volunteer assessments.

"I think it's amazing what has happened in Pelham," said Ms. Kelly. "We're sort of like a case study with what should happen within all of these communities."

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