

Helmet study is a first for girls' lacrosse



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Crash-test dummies subjected to a barrage of sticks to the head may help settle the debate over whether helmets should be required in girls' lacrosse.

There has been increased concern over concussions in a sport that prohibits the use of hard helmets, while soft headgear in the girls' game is allowed. Hard helmets are required in the men's version of the game.

Brown University in Rhode Island will conduct a study during the third week of July to try to determine whether helmets will help protect girls from concussions caused by stick-to-head contact, and if so, what type.

"Right now, there is no standard for head protection in the women's game," said Ann Kitt Carpenetti, the managing director of game administration for US Lacrosse, the sport's governing body. "There is an allowance in our rules for soft headgear, but no testing has been done and little or no research."

The issue of requiring helmets in girls' lacrosse, at the high school and college levels, remains a hot-button issue. Many of the players and coaches fear that mandatory helmet use, especially of the hard-shell variety, would make their sport too physical and more like the boys game. But some in the medical profession are fearful of the danger of concussions and are in favor of required helmet use.

Females use more 'finesse'

"The girls' sport was meant to be a finesse sport, an athletic sport, and not a power sport or a brute-force sport," said Shoreham - Wading River coach Mary Ann Bergmann. "US Lacrosse and the referees' associations need to come together and figure out what's best for the sport."

Long Island, which has about 2,000 girls playing lacrosse on 104 high school teams, was the focus of the debate last spring, when Alexandra Fehmel, a star player on Bergmann's team, began playing with a soft helmet designed by a family friend. Before wearing the soft helmet, Fehmel had suffered two concussions playing lacrosse.

Fehmel, whose team won the Class C state championship in June, said wearing the soft helmet "has definitely helped me with my confidence. It protects me from stick-to-head injuries and any concussion I might get from that. I'm not scared to go to goal anymore. I'm not afraid to be aggressive."

Could the results of this summer's testing be the first step toward requiring helmets?

"I would not say that helmet use is inevitable. I would say that what's inevitable is that there will be a standard, hopefully by next year," said Carpenetti.

She said that US Lacrosse, in conjunction with the National Operating Committee on Standards for Athletic Equipment, which established national standards for football and baseball helmets, has funded the research project at Brown.

Project director Joseph "Trey" Crisco, a professor of orthopedics at Brown, said his study's goal "is to try to understand what head accelerations girls receive during games. How hard is the head being impacted by ball or stick?"

He said he had hoped to use sensors to measure that impact, but there was no place to effectively attach the sensors on players' heads.

"So we decided to use dummies, like they use in car crash simulations," Crisco said. "We have a model and we will have girls lacrosse players from the [Rhode Island] area come into our lab and whack away from different angles. They'll be whacking on the top of the 'head' and the side of the 'head.' They'll use the tip, the shaft and the middle of the stick so we can determine the severity of stick checks."

Crisco noted that the head forms are gender-neutral, "but they do have sizes, and we're using the smaller size."

Crisco said that once the data is compiled, "it will help US Lacrosse determine the type of helmets or whether there is even a need for them."

Crisco said results will require four to six weeks to be analyzed, and he estimates it will take several months before the report is ready.

One player's decision

For Fehmel, the question of requiring helmets has already been answered. She said she favors

requiring soft helmets but not hard ones.

"Hard helmets would hurt players even more, just from bumping into each other," she said.

Bergmann, who currently is playing lacrosse in Europe where no headgear is worn, said she isn't sure where she stands on the issue of helmets.

"If you give everyone helmets, is the game going to become more aggressive?" she asked.
"That's why I'm still in between."

Dr. Karl Friedman, Nassau County's supervising physician for football and lacrosse championships, is not a helmet advocate. "We don't need the helmet," he said. "We don't want to change the game. . . . The more equipment you put on them, the more you can let them play because now the safety is covered by the equipment. Absolutely they'll be more careless with their sticks. They'll be more fearless and the referees will loosen up."

Getting a second opinion

However, there are those in the medical community who feel strongly that hard-shell, boys-style lacrosse helmets are not only essential in the girls' game, but inevitable.

"When rules for girls lacrosse were written, they were written to keep the ball and stick out of the sphere of the head," said Dr. Jack Marzec, team physician for West Islip and East Islip high schools and consulting orthopedic physician for the Long Island Lizards professional men's lacrosse team.

"Girls are getting quicker, stronger, more aggressive," he added. "They're looking for scholarships and they want to win, just like the boys. I am adamant that hard helmets must be instituted in girls' lacrosse because it's impossible to keep the stick and ball off the head."

Nationally known concussion expert Dr. Micky Collins, of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, said he can't make up his mind whether requiring female players to wear helmets is a good idea.

"I'm sitting on the fence," he said. "We know girls are more at risk for concussions. . . . There are a lot of issues on the table here. The only way to answer these questions is to do the research and find out, scientifically, where we're at. There is no good science leading us right now."