

NFHS Responds to Recent Deaths in High School Football

By Bob Gardner on October 28, 2015

[blog](#)

The latest information from our member state associations indicates that eight high school students have died this fall directly or indirectly from their involvement in football. As these deaths have occurred, numerous national media outlets, including the CBS Evening News, have questioned the safety of high school football.

Certainly, the death of any high school student, whether the individual plays football, runs cross country or plays in the band, is a tragic event. Though the odds are challenging with nearly 12 million participants in high school sports and performing arts combined, the goal of the NFHS and its member associations each year is that no fatalities would occur.

The goal of the NFHS and its member associations each year is that no fatalities would occur.

We believe many of these recent media reports are unfairly targeting the sport of football and questioning whether schools, as well as state and national organizations, are doing enough to prevent these tragedies.

First, some perspective. In the 1960s and 1970s, there were years when more than 30 deaths were reported in high school football. Rules changes enacted by the NFHS in the 1970s, including the prohibition of spearing, began to reduce the number of fatalities. During the past 30 years, the number of fatalities annually has been greatly reduced – from a low of two in 1994 to a high of 18 in 2001. In addition, for the past 10 years, the NFHS and its member state associations have taken numerous steps in the areas of concussion awareness and management.

The NFHS has specifically addressed concussion management in all rules books for several years, and more than two million individuals have taken our free online course – *Concussion in Sports* – available through the NFHS Learning Center at www.NFHSLearn.com. Points of emphasis on helmet-to-helmet contact and blows to the head, as well as a new definition and penalty for targeting, have been published in the NFHS Football Rules Book.

Some of the fatalities in the aforementioned numbers have been related to cardiac issues. To assist schools with handling heart-related emergencies, the NFHS has added a free online course – *Sudden Cardiac Arrest* – to the NFHS Learning Center.

Last year, a 24-member Concussion Task Force appointed by the NFHS adopted nine fundamentals for

minimizing head impact exposure and concussion risk in football, with the overriding goal of reducing the amount of full contact in practices during the season. State associations then developed specific recommendations for reducing full contact in football for schools in their respective states.

In addition to the *Concussion in Sport* and *Sudden Cardiac Arrest* courses, two other courses through the NFHS Learning Center – *Heat Illness Prevention* and *High School Heads Up Football* – have been accessed by thousands of coaches and school leaders across the country. After a rise in the number of heat stroke deaths from 2006 to 2011, only three have been reported in the past four years. The *High School Heads Up Football* course spotlights the program developed by USA Football and endorsed by the NFHS to teach proper tackling and blocking techniques.

Despite all of these efforts on the part of the NFHS, its member state associations and the 19,000-plus high schools across the country to reduce the chance for serious injury or death, there remains a risk involved in playing high school sports. With 1.1 million students playing a full-contact, collision sport such as football, there is a degree of risk involved. However, with the educational materials that are available and rules/protocols that are in place, there is less risk for a 15- to 18-year-old to participate in football than to drive a car.

Some critics have suggested that the risk of serious injuries in high school sports would be reduced even more if every school had a full-time athletic trainer on staff. Although only 37 percent of schools have full-time trainers, about 70 percent have access to trainers at games.

In theory, this assertion is hard to refute. In reality, it is, at best, an overwhelming challenge. For the many small schools in remote locations with tight budgets, the availability of a full-time athletic trainer is not possible. In those situations where a full-time trainer is not an option, schools must assign those duties to other individuals and develop an alternate plan for dealing with catastrophic injuries. The NFHS is working with the Mississippi High School Activities Association on a pilot telemedicine program in 11 Mississippi schools. Other states, including Washington and Arkansas, are also beginning to utilize telemedicine programs, which could benefit those schools without trainers.

All schools – with or without a full-time trainer – must develop an Emergency Action Plan, which includes readily accessible Automated External Defibrillators (AEDs) in the school and on the court or field.

We wish we would not have to report another death in high school sports. That goal starts with continuing our efforts to minimize risk for the 12 million participants in high school activity programs.

Bob Gardner

Bob Gardner is the executive director of the NFHS.