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Tackling Concussions

by [Lisa Dawson](#) in [Health](#)[Bookmark](#)

Fifteen years ago, the mention of the word “concussion” meant little more than someone banging their head hard and laying low for a few days. Concussions were often misdiagnosed, symptoms were vague and treatment was loosely interpreted. “Getting your bell rung” or getting knocked out during a game was nearly seen as a badge of honor. It showed commitment, fearlessness and bravery. There were few medical warnings about concussions and those that did warn fell on deaf ears.

In fact, as early as 1933, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) warned college sports coaches that concussions were being treated too lightly. It recommended a player be under constant supervision and care for 48 hours and that players not be permitted to compete again for 21 days, or never again. In 1952, a study in the New England Journal of Medicine recommended players who receive three concussions leave sports permanently for their own safety. 20 years later, in the Journal of Neurosurgery, a condition called “Second Impact Syndrome” was identified. If a player sustains a concussion while still suffering from the effects of an earlier concussion, it carried a 90 percent mortality rate.

More than 80 years after the NCAA’s first warning, concussions are finally being recognized as significant, serious, and in their worst form, potentially life-threatening. It took a Nigerian-American physician, forensic pathologist and neuropathologist named Dr. Bennet Omalu, the tragic life of football player Mike Webster and the National Football League (NFL) admitting concussions lead to “long-term problems.” It even took actor Will Smith and a \$34 million blockbuster movie, “Concussion,” to help bring concussions to the forefront of the American mind.

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Dr. Omalu was the first to discover the protein in the brain that causes a degenerative brain disease called “Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy” (CTE). CTE was the first direct link between traumatic head trauma and dementia later in life. Of the 91 former NFL players whose brains were studied post-mortem, 87 were diagnosed with CTE.

Sports are large culprits of concussions, so it is especially concerning for children. According to Youth Sports Safety Statistics, in 2012, more than 1.35 million children were seen in an emergency department for a sports-related injury. Specifically, with regard to traumatic brain injuries and concussions, emergency department visits doubled among 8-13 year olds between 1997 and 2007 and nearly tripled among older youth.

Dr. Johnathan Walker, a board certified neurologist and head of the Neurotherapy Center of Dallas, has been studying and researching neuroscience for 45 years. He says, contrary to popular medical opinion, CT scans and MRIs cannot diagnose a concussion. “CT scans and MRIs only show bleeding and tissue damage in the brain. Even with a significant concussion, there can be no bleeding or tearing.” In his practice, he uses a quantitative EEG, or brain wave scan, to diagnose concussions. “The brain is like a bowl full of jelly. When there is head injury, you hit one side of the head and the brain hits the skull, then it bounces back and hits the other side. You can actually have a significant concussion and have a normal neurological exam.”

Just like every other area of our body, the brain is electric. 100 billion nerve cells, called “neurons,” send messages to one another through electrical activity, like the wires in a computer. Information is gathered and transmitted throughout every area of the brain. When the head is injured and the brain is shaken loose and damaged, that electrical activity gets disrupted. Until the brain is healed, typically through rest for a few days, a concussion patient can struggle with symptoms such as headache, nausea, memory loss, confusion, dizziness, vomiting, ringing of the ears and loss of balance. In some severe concussion cases, these symptoms can last for longer periods of time, from several months to a year and even longer.

The Frisco Football League says it has already taken precautions to help players minimize injury. Matt Wargel, the vice president of football for the league, says there were a total of five concussions sustained by players last season. Mr. Wargel says heads up tackling and heads up blocking, two techniques that aim to remove the head from impact, have been implemented during the last six years. The league also follows the University Interscholastic League requirements that limit the amount of contact each player and team can have on a weekly basis. Athletic trainers are required to be at every game to be able to handle any injuries that may occur. Mr. Wargel says if a player does sustain a concussion, there is a return to play policy, including being screened and cleared by a medical doctor and completing a practice protocol to see if a player has cleared past concussion symptoms.

While football is doing its part to help players, it is still a risky game. One of the ways football players can reduce their chances of a traumatic brain injury is through better protective gear. Troy Horton, the CEO at Gridiron Technologies, says their line of helmets, manufactured by Xenith, use a special design and technology to help protect players. Mr. Horton says there is no such thing as a “concussion-proof helmet,” but advances in protective equipment are making the game safer. Mr. Horton, a Burrton, Kan., native, founded Gridiron Technologies with a passion for helping keep kids safer on the football field. Mr. Horton estimates he suffered close to two dozen concussions on the field, playing high school, college and semi-pro football.

Not all concussions are associated with sports. Just ask 12-year-old Sienna Lawson of Frisco. In October of 2015, Sienna and her family were attending a Halloween party. Playing with friends, Sienna was chased by her friend’s little brother into a dark room. Not knowing where she was in an unfamiliar house, she fell backwards and hit her head in an empty bathtub. The force of the initial impact was so strong, her head bounced up and she hit the bathtub a second time. “It was the worst pain I have ever felt,” she says. “Everything turned purple. I thought I would be sick and I was just screaming.” Her parents took her to the emergency room that evening.

Initially, doctors told Sienna’s parents she would be fine in a few days. Days turned to weeks, and weeks to months, only to find Sienna’s symptoms, including nausea, dizziness, sleeplessness, double vision, balance issues, emotional disturbances and debilitating headaches, not getting any better. Sienna’s mom said they sought the help of multiple doctors, including pediatric neurologists and concussion specialists, to no avail. After months of seeing doctors, some started to recommend that Sienna was suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder or even worse, seeking attention. Sienna eventually found a doctor that helped her look for answers. Through the use of medication and prism glasses,

doctors were not in my body and they could not feel what I was feeling.”

Frisco parents have a variety of options when it comes to keeping their young athletes and active kids safe. Knowing the symptoms and taking precautions can be the difference in life and death.

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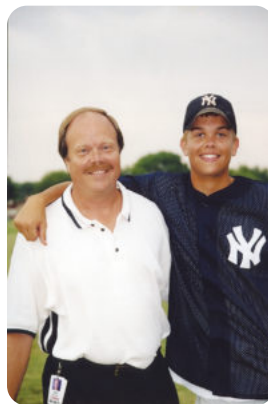
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Steroid abuse is a real problem. In fact, you could call it a national epidemic. While most people associate steroid abuse with professional athletes, the truth is, the problem hits closer to home than you may think. A recent study by the Partnership for Drug Free Kids shows that the use of steroids and other appearance and performance enhancing drugs (APEDs) among America's youth is alarming. Experts say as much as seven percent of all U.S. high school and middle school students admit to knowingly using anabolic steroids. Mathematically, that equates to about three to four dozen students per high school, and about one student per classroom. These findings do not reflect the number of people who are unknowingly ingesting APEDs via unregulated dietary supplements spiked with these drugs.

With high expectations in youth sports programs, young athletes sometimes turn to steroids to build muscle, help them run faster and to get the upper edge in their sport. The results can be deadly, as one local family sadly found out.

Longtime Collin County resident Don Hooton shares,



"Our youngest son, Taylor, committed suicide in July of 2003. We soon learned that Taylor had been using anabolic steroids for about seven months before he died. Multiple experts reviewed Taylor's case and determined that the depression that led him to take his life resulted from his use of anabolic steroids. As parents, we were completely caught off guard. We were unaware that so many kids were playing with these drugs and shocked to find out how dangerous these drugs can be. Our friends were just as unaware of this situation. Feeling that we were called by God to address this problem, we formed a foundation for the purpose of raising awareness about the scope of the problem, while educating kids and their parents about the dangers of these drugs."

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Instead of getting lost in their heartbreak, Mr. Hooton and his wife, Gwen, decided to channel their grief into a mission, creating a foundation that is dedicated to educating families, children, school districts, the Texas legislature in Austin and even congressional committees in Washington, D.C. about the dangers of APEDs. Mr. Hooton explains, “The Taylor Hooton Foundation (THF) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Collin County. The foundation was formed in memory of our son, Taylor E. Hooton, a 17-year-old high school athlete from Plano, Texas. After Taylor took his own life, Gwen and I, our family and our friends founded the organization after learning of the growing number of middle school, high school and college students illegally using and abusing anabolic steroids, human growth hormones (HGH), unregulated dietary supplements and other APEDs.”

Mr. Hooton continues, “We discovered that this is a serious problem among young athletes and non-athletes, and learned that young people and their parents are uneducated about either the prevalence of or the real dangers of these powerful drugs. In the years since Taylor’s death, usage rates among the nation’s youth have reached epidemic levels. In response to this problem, THF has built a small team that travels the continent speaking to and educating young people and their adult influencers about APEDs. THF is widely recognized as the national leader in education on the topic of APED use by the youth of the U.S., Canada and Latin America. To date, the THF has spoken to almost one million people directly with our educational programs.” These staggering statistics are shared on

taylorhooton.org.

Usage rates of anabolic steroids and other APEDs continue to grow. “It has crept into society all around us, and we do not even notice it! While the usage began in the athletic community, it has now spread to the general youth population. Young people are turning to these drugs in an effort to help them look better and may never compete in athletic activities,” Mr. Hooton shares.

Most people think this is an athletic problem, but it is really a body image problem. “An astounding number of teenage girls and boys admit to taking APEDs for body enhancing reasons. They want bodies that are not achievable without the use of these drugs. Most people are aware of anorexia and bulimia (getting skinny), but what we have with APED abuse is ‘bigorexia,’ people wanting to get bigger,” Mr. Hooton says. “Most parents have the ‘this is not going to happen to my kid’ mentality, yet the stats about anabolic steroid use are staggering.”

With recent studies showing seven percent of the total high school population admitting to using APEDs, that means 140 kids right up the street are using these drugs.

Mr. Hooton says, “The seriousness of the problem with steroid use does not translate with kids. In order to stop steroid use, parents and coaches must have real discussions about the negative effects of these drugs, and we need to be aware of the signs and symptoms of abuse. Steroids can have long-lasting and sometimes irreversible side effects on the body.”

The only real weapon we have at our disposal is education. “We travel the country speaking to kids and their adult influencers. Our goal is to provide people with the information they need to make good decisions, to get them to understand that these drugs are dangerous and unnecessary,” Mr. Hooton says. “We came up with the idea of identifying role models to hold up for kids as examples of professional athletes who make it to the top of every sport by doing things the right way ... hard work, exercise and eating properly. With this in mind, we created the All Me™ League. We approached Major League Baseball (MLB) with the idea and they agreed to support our outreach to their players. I am proud to tell you that we now have a player from each of all 30 MLB teams who have joined our THF All Me Advisory Board,” he adds. Each player signs a pledge to live and compete PED free, and all are promoted on allmeleague.com. In addition to players, the organization has second and third groups of professionals who have agreed to live and compete PED free, including athletic trainers and strength coaches. In addition to serving on the board, All Me players talk to children at their games and tell them how they made it to the top without doing drugs. These role models show kids that you can make it to the top without cheating, and that you can achieve your goals by doing the right things in the right way. This helps send a very powerful message to kids.

Today, THF has grown to six full-time personnel, but they are always looking for volunteers to help them with their mission. Mr. Hooton adds, “We encourage people in the community to become involved by volunteering to participate in our various fundraising activities that we hold

The primary sponsor for THF is MLB. Other national sports leagues like the National Football League (NFL) and National Hockey League (NHL) also support THF. In addition, the organization has sponsorships from a number of local companies including Smith Thompson Security, Home Team Insurance, First Choice Loans, Numerex Corp and others. They also rely on a number of annual fundraisers to provide financial support to educational programs, including an annual gala in the spring, a cigar happy hour in June, a special event at Yankee Stadium in August, a golf tournament and accompanying tailgate party in September and a clay shooting event in October.

Mr. Hooton concludes, “My message to parents is please do not be naive and think that your child is immune to using these drugs. Our job, collectively, is to provide our children with the information they need. Your kids do not need supplements, and certainly do not allow them to purchase a supplement that is not on the approved NSF Certified for Sport® list. NSF International created this specially-designed program as a nonprofit company focused on testing dietary supplements or sports nutrition products to ensure they do not contain banned substances. They just simply do not need it. If it is good enough for the Texas Rangers, it is good enough for you.”

For more information about THF, to volunteer or to learn more about APEDs, visit taylorhooton.org or call 972.403.7300. Be healthy. Be smart. Educate. Communicate. Be vigilant. Say no to drugs.

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