

## SPORTS

# As Concussion Worries Rise, Girls' Lacrosse Turns to Headgear

By BILL PENNINGTON NOV. 23, 2017

The debate over whether headgear should be mandatory in girls' lacrosse has been contentious for decades, fueled by fears that such equipment would turn their temperate game into a rugged version of hard-hitting boys' lacrosse, where helmets have been required for years.

By rule, headgear remains optional in girls' lacrosse.

But in the last year, with concerns about head injuries increasing, hundreds of teams and school districts across the nation, including New York City's, have made headgear compulsory at girls' lacrosse games and practices.

Florida imposed a headgear mandate on the approximately 5,400 high school girls playing the sport there. Brown University purchased headgear for its entire team in the spring, sending a jolt throughout the college lacrosse community. Officials say Brown is the first major N.C.A.A. program to make headgear available to all of its players, though it remains optional for them to use it.

Bill Pierce, the athletic director for the Corning-Painted Post school district in upstate New York, where the varsity and junior varsity girls' lacrosse teams last season were required to wear headgear, said it was an easy decision.

"We put mouth guards on their teeth and have them wear goggles to protect their eyes," said Pierce, citing two established, obligatory pieces of equipment in

girls' lacrosse. "The most valuable commodity they have is their brain, so we were all in when it came to protecting the most important part of their body."

At Holy Innocents' Episcopal School in Atlanta, Dana Patton and Diane Pagano, whose daughters had each sustained concussions, spearheaded an initiative requiring every player in the program to wear headgear. The move received unanimous support. About 70 families from the middle school to the high school level footed the \$150 cost per player for headgear during the 2017 spring season.

"The girls became better, more confident players," Patton said. "We certainly don't want the girls' game to turn into the boys' game; we want the officials to call the rules as they are. And with the extra protection this past year, we saw a drop in head injuries."

The percentage of players nationwide wearing headgear remains small and there is no available data measuring the equipment's affect on head injury rates, although the mandates in New York City and Florida may make those locations viable laboratories for testing.

There is no consensus, either, on whether the girls who are using headgear are playing any rougher.

U.S. Lacrosse, the sport's governing body overseeing more than 315,000 girls and women playing lacrosse at all levels — a number that has nearly doubled in the last 10 years — has stood by its position that headgear is optional. But the organization is closely monitoring the surge in headgear use.

"We see the pockets around the country where headgear is no longer an oddity," said Ann Carpenetti, U.S. Lacrosse's vice president for lacrosse operations.

Carpenetti added: "In time, there could be an entire generation of players that come up playing with headgear."

The pushback against headgear, however, is staunch and unswerving, especially among the highest-level college coaches, who view headgear as a threat to the integrity and spirit of the girls' game, where the rules generally forbid contact.

“As soon as you put helmets on, you’re going to end up going to shoulder pads because the kids hit harder,” said Karin Corbett, the women’s lacrosse coach at the University of Pennsylvania and a former national coach of the year. “They also will start to lead with their heads because they feel protected, and that causes more injuries.

“We’ll become a more physical sport and a very different looking sport than we are today.”

Corbett noted that last season she had a player wear headgear because of three previous concussions. The headgear, Corbett said, did not stop the player from sustaining another concussion, and that one ended her career.

Boston College Coach Acacia Walker also opposes headgear in the sport, though she said she would not stop a player from wearing it.

“Our game is already getting closer and closer to the men’s game,” said Walker, whose team was the runner-up for the N.C.A.A. championship last season. “Helmets and then pads would lead to the merging of the rules and the same game.”

Walker added that if there came a time when headgear was required at the college level, she would not want to coach.

Still, an increasingly nervous band of parents and athletic administrators have pushed for headgear, pointing to escalating rates of head trauma in girls’ lacrosse.

In recent studies, girls’ lacrosse had the fifth-highest rate of concussions in high school sports; only football, ice hockey, boys’ lacrosse and girls’ soccer rank higher. And although no headgear, even hard-shell helmets, has been proven to prevent all concussions, headgear has been effective in lessening head trauma caused by stick-to-head or ball-to-head contact, which does occur in girls’ lacrosse. Goalies in girls’ lacrosse have worn helmets for years.

Three years ago, Dawn Comstock, an expert on sports injuries and an associate professor of epidemiology for the Pediatric Injury Prevention, Education and Research Program at the Colorado School of Public Health, published data showing

that most concussions in girls' lacrosse occurred when players were struck by the ball or a stick.

While the movement in support of headgear has been building for years, the impetus for the recent uptick in its usage is directly related to new equipment made available at the end of 2016.

Until then, there was no headgear specifically designed for girls' lacrosse, and wearing hard-shell helmets from boys' lacrosse was banned because it might endanger opposing players.

But last year, U.S. Lacrosse and A.S.T.M. International, an organization that develops and publishes standards for a range of products, approved the first guidelines for headgear designed for the women's game. Two manufacturers, Cascade, the leading maker of boys' lacrosse helmets, and Hummingbird Sports, a start-up in Holmdel, N.J., met the standard with products that are malleable on the outside. The price of the headgear ranges from \$140 to \$150 and the Cascade product comes with integrated protective eyewear.

Not long afterward, the Public Schools Athletic League, which governs a vast portion of scholastic sports in New York City, chose to require its roughly 900 high school players to wear headgear for the 2017 spring season. At a cost of roughly \$89,000, most of which was defrayed by a sponsor, every league player was outfitted with headgear.

Cascade has since sold its product to more than 225 teams in 20 states, according to Jenna Abelli, the company's senior brand manager for women's lacrosse. Hummingbird Sports has likewise seen a nationwide appeal, said Jared Kaban, one of the founders of the company.

But at the college level, where the mere mention of headgear can ignite an especially prickly debate, headgear sales have been met with more resistance. And for that reason, Brown University's decision to make headgear available to its players drew sharp attention.

It was initially reported on social media, erroneously, that Brown was requiring its players to wear headgear — a falsehood that spread to virtually every corner of the N.C.A.A. coaching ranks. In reality, just two Brown players wore headgear last season and the university decided to buy enough headgear to outfit the entire team and make its use optional.

U.S. Lacrosse did its best to quell the disinformation but the subject has remained a touchy one for Brown, whose coach, Keely McDonald, declined to be interviewed about the university's headgear decision last month. McDonald also refused to allow her players to speak about the matter. Later, McDonald issued a brief statement that read in part: "We are committed to the safety of all our student-athletes."

Several other college coaches in the last few weeks did not make themselves available for interviews despite multiple requests, although Syracuse University's longtime coach, Gary Gait, said he supported headgear use.

"I think it would definitely keep more players on the field," Gait said.

Other leaders in the collegiate women's lacrosse community may be hesitant to comment because of recent court proceedings that have brought added scrutiny to the issue.

In September, a New York State court ruled that a former Hofstra University lacrosse player, Samantha Greiber, could proceed with her claim for negligence against the N.C.A.A. because, the court ruled, the N.C.A.A. "effectively prohibited" Greiber from wearing protective headgear. According to her lawyer, Aron U. Raskas, Greiber suffers from permanent brain injuries resulting from two concussions that she sustained while playing on the team.

The N.C.A.A. issued a statement in response: "The court's ruling was at a very early stage of the case. As the case proceeds, we think it will become clear to the court that the N.C.A.A. should not be a defendant in the action."

Still, many parents welcome the switch to headgear.

At Corning-Painted Post High School, an on-field incident in 2016 — an opponent without headgear was struck in the head at point blank range when a shot was rifled at the goal — prompted athletic administrators to require headgear the following season. The school district paid \$6,600 for the equipment.

Stephanie Cooper, the school's longtime varsity coach, is a former college player. Before this year, Cooper aligned herself with those who feared that headgear would irreparably change the game.

"I now see the benefits," Cooper said, adding that her team incurred no head injuries last season. "If the rules are enforced, it doesn't change the style of play or increase the physicality of the game."

Logan Olmstead, a 17-year-old midfielder for Corning-Painted Post, said she and her teammates were a little skeptical about the headgear at first — mostly because of the aesthetics.

"But in the end," Olmstead said, "we realized it can help us play the game as long as we can. And it made everyone safe, comfortable and confident.

"That turned our perspective in a positive way."

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