

Helmets protect heads, not brains

By Elliot F. Kaye and Edith Ramirez

The phenomenon that is the Super Bowl will play out on Sunday in Levi's Stadium. Yet, while the spotlight is on the pro game, we believe there is a need for more attention to an issue affecting the majority of athletes — those in high school and youth sports.

Hope of a promising school year on and off the field for many of these young athletes has sadly been overtaken by real concern — that a season of blows to the head could lead to significant brain injuries that may not be truly understood until later in life.

As the leaders of the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission and the Federal Trade Commission, we want parents, players and coaches to know that there is no helmet or device on the market that has been proven to prevent a concussion. Don't believe anyone who says otherwise.

Regardless of the sport, helmets are designed — and proven in almost all cases — to protect against catastrophic injuries, such as skull fractures and bleeding of the brain.

But, helmets and other headgear have severe limitations when it comes to protecting a brain, especially that of a child. This may be counterintuitive, as it makes perfect sense to think that if a helmet protects your head, it must protect your head inside and out.

Safety awareness is better than it was a generation ago and the sports safety culture is improving. Still, many parents wonder if there is a product they can buy to help keep their children safe from sports-related concussions and other serious brain injuries. Our answer: Save your money.

We're concerned that many athletes are relying on products, such as certain helmets and headbands, that do not live up to their concussion-reduction marketing. We are also concerned that parents, coaches and players are mistakenly relying exclusively on sensors, instead of qualified medical personnel or certified athletic trainers, to make decisions about player health and fitness to continue playing.

The FTC has scrutinized concussion-protection claims in recent years for a variety of products, including football helmets and mouthguards. The agency settled a case in 2012 against a mouthguard manufacturer, Brain-Pad, Inc., and its president, after alleging that the company made false and unproven claims that Brain-Pad mouthguards reduced the risk of concussion.

The FTC also investigated three major football helmet manufacturers, Riddell Sports Group, Inc., Schutt Sports, Inc., and Xenith, LLC, which resulted in them discontinuing potentially deceptive claims that their helmets reduced the risk of concussions.

We also are working to accelerate change in the safety culture of youth sports, especially through efforts the Consumer Product Safety Commission and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have initiated with the five major professional sports leagues.

Culture change involves teaching coaches to coach the game the right way, supporting the involvement of trained medical professionals, and not criticizing players who rightly sit it out when they might have suffered a brain injury. No matter the sport, if a young athlete is showing signs of a concussion, we say: "If in doubt, sit it out."

Teaching children to take care of their brains is the best investment to help them reach their full potential.

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