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'A phenomenal tool': High-tech football helmets get positive reception at area high schools

By Erin Duffy // World-Herald staff writer Oct 11, 2017



Burke High players with impact-sensing helmets, which are now in use by all seven OPS high schools, Creighton Prep and Bellevue East and West.

MATT DIXON/THE WORLD-HERALD

High school football season is well underway, and coaches and athletic trainers give a passing grade to the new high-tech helmets that some teams are trying out this year.

The helmets are outfitted with sensors, part of the InSite Impact Response system, that send an alert when a player has sustained a hard hit. Coaches or athletic trainers can then pull that athlete from practice or a game and check for signs of a concussion or head injury.

There have been a few bugs to work out.



During the first week with the [helmets at Bellevue West](#), some of the sensors were going off even when players just stood on the sidelines, head coach Michael Huffman said. A software fix quickly solved the problem.

Meanwhile, the Omaha Public Schools [got off to a slow start](#) as coaches, doctors and athletic trainers met for weeks to iron out the details of how the new gear would be used. OPS didn't switch on the helmet technology until late August, during the second week of game play.

But glitches and delays aside, officials said the helmets are proving to be a valuable tool to alert staff on the sidelines when a player has absorbed a hard hit.

“The helmets will send a sensor that the student-athlete received a pretty strong hit, an assessment is done, and in many cases there is no concussion,” OPS Athletic Director Steve Eubanks said. “But we feel so much better having that data and that technology to assess the student-athlete.”

[Thanks to donations](#), all seven OPS high schools, Creighton Prep and Bellevue East and West bought the new Riddell Speedflex helmets this year. They cost about \$400 each.

Now, alerts tend to go off once or twice during practices and games, said Shannon Gier, Bellevue West’s athletic trainer. Some days, three or four alerts may sound, and other days none go off. When it does happen, that player reports to the sidelines, where Gier performs a two- to five-minute concussion evaluation.

Several concussions have been diagnosed that may not have been otherwise, Gier said. Coaches and athletic trainers always scan the field, but they don’t have eyes on every hit.

One alert went off when a player hit the ground — it didn’t even look like a particularly rough impact, Huffman said. But Gier checked the player and found symptoms of a head injury.

“Our school district is awesome,” Huffman said. “We have top-of-the-line shoulder pads, helmets. (Parents) know we’re putting our kids’ safety first.”

Still, schools have been careful to explain to parents and players the function and limitations of the new helmets: They don’t diagnose or prevent concussions.

“It’s a tool,” Huffman said. “It’s not the end-all, be-all.”

In OPS, a group of athletic trainers, doctors and other health care professionals also developed a protocol that dictates how coaches and athletic trainers should respond when an alert sounds. And parents and students received a fact sheet on how the helmets work and were asked to sign a consent form and waiver.

The feedback from players, coaches and parents has been overwhelmingly positive, Eubanks said.

“The helmets have been fantastic,” he said. “They are a phenomenal tool, but if I could change anything, it would be to have more time on the front end to educate the coaches, to educate the trainers, to get information out to the parents and to the student-athletes.”

OPS began receiving the helmets in early August, just before practices started. It took several weeks for the response protocol to be finalized and for teams to get set up with the new equipment.

Coaches had to input each player’s name, number and position into the sensor software, so the alert would pinpoint who took the hit.

The five-zone sensor pads inside the helmet are synced up to a hand-held device that coaches or athletic trainers carry. If a hit or series of hits exceeds a predetermined threshold, an alert will sound to notify those on the sideline that a player’s head may have taken a rough impact.

Team staff can track that data. If one player is taking a lot of hard hits that trigger the alerts, coaches can use that to correct a player's tackling technique, for example.

"It's a tool not only for our medical staff but for our coaches," Creighton Prep Athletic Director Dan Schinzel said. "You have a kid that's getting a lot of alerts ... a coach can look at that and say we have to work on him keeping his head up and ... tackling with better form."

OPS coaches carry the hand-held alert monitors at all times. If an alert goes off, coaches are supposed to pull the player and look for any signs of a concussion: a headache, blurred vision, confusion. If any symptoms surface, an athletic trainer performs a full evaluation.

When in doubt, coaches and trainers will make players sit out until they've been cleared.

"We're going to err on the side of safety," Eubanks said.

The hit data collected by the helmet sensors would be considered a student record — parents could request to view their child's data.

Creighton Prep’s athletic trainer, Bill Kleber, has been tracking the alert data this season. So far, alerts typically go off once or twice during each game. During one early practice, five alerts sounded, the highest recorded number.

Once the season wraps up, Kleber will crunch the data and see how many concussions were diagnosed this year compared with past seasons.

“So far, for us, it’s been a pretty good purchase,” he said. “We’re kind of lucky to have them.”

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