

New research on head injuries could shift high school athletics participation

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SPRINGVILLE – The National Federation of State High School Associations annually tracks participation in high school athletics. During the 2017-18 season, NFHS reported a record 7,980,886 participants that spans a continuous growth since 1989. With the near three-decade overall rise, the top-ranked sport for boys has had a trending decline.

Football has declined 6.6 percent nationwide over the past decade, according to the NFHS. Last year alone there were 20,000 fewer participants and 20 schools dropped football programs nationwide.

The decline parallels research with head trauma and brain injury. School districts have taken precautions to head injury that includes a legal requirement, according to Springville-Griffith Institute Athletic Director Joseph DeMartino.

“All of our coaches are mandated by law to maintain concussion certification through New York State Public High School Athletics Association. [Springville] also has our athletic trainer speak to all our coaches prior to the start of each season,” DeMartino said.



Gerald Czemerynski, S-GI athletic trainer, assesses a basketball injury during the Emerling Tournament last December.

Gerald Czemerynski has been S-GI's athletic trainer for more than three decades and has no reservations in stating that he would not allow any of his children to compete in football based on his experiences as an athletic trainer and the education he has received about head injury. He recommends the decision to participate in high school athletics should begin with

dialogue.

"As the district athletic trainer, I feel as though the athletes, as well as the parents, need to sit down and have an open discussion in regard to the consequences of joining a contact or collision sport because of the high instances of concussions and blows to the head," Czemerynski said. "Something that should also be considered is if the athlete to that point has had any concussions due to falls and other pre-exposed issues where they've had [prior] head injury."

Springville student-athlete Mikey Evans had one of those sit-down discussions with his parents, but only after a third concussion in wrestling led him to decide to give the sport up after becoming a two-time state qualifier.

"They let me decide, but I decided right after it happened and then my parents told me their thoughts and they agreed with my decision,"

Evans said. "I wouldn't say I have regrets. I wish I could still wrestle but I know that it isn't good for my health. [The decision] was hard, but I knew it was the right decision," he added.

Evans is fine now, but the recovery was long and difficult.



Mikey Evans dominated opponents as a Springville wrestler.

"I would come home from school and sit in a dark room for two hours each day away from bright light and noise. I did this for about seven weeks in addition to wearing sunglasses everywhere else," Evans said.

The most recent research in head injury revolves around chronic traumatic encephalopathy or CTE. It progressed after National Football League Hall of Famer Mike Webster became the first professional football player diagnosed with the condition after his 2002 death.

According to the Brain Injury Research Institute, which has been researching the brain since 1996, "[CTE] is a progressive degenerative disease which afflicts the brain of people who have suffered repeated concussions and traumatic brain injuries, such as athletes who take part in contact sports, members of the military and others ... CTE is a condition of progressive degeneration of the brain tissue which is the result of repeated concussions. While the brain tissue degenerates, a protein called tau protein begins to accumulate. The symptoms of CTE may take years or even decades to develop, but when they do the results can be life-changing for the individual and his or her loved

ones."

While many associate CTE as a football-related head injury, Czemerynski regards it as a contact or collision sport injury that could happen in several other venues. Because the longtime athletic trainer has seen more head injuries over his time at Springville in football and soccer, he holds an information session for parents in the fall when those sports are in season as a proactive approach that goes beyond the laws required by school districts to provide head trauma information. Those laws include protocols in place when injury is suspected, and to have those directly involved with either athletics or its medical assessment complete a course from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

"What happens in soccer is that even though it's not a contact sport, it's a collision sport. Specifically, it involves collision with other athletes and the ground," Czemerynski said.

Czemerynski annually attends an information seminar with other schools from the same high school section to receive the latest information and education about concussions.

"I work a lot with our team doctor from Springville Pediatrics and we do have in place an iron-clad return-to-play process for kids that are concussed. The final step involves a conference and an agreement between myself and Springville Pediatrics to allow the student to return," Czemerynski said.

In addition to collaboration with Springville Pediatrics and an annual parent's information meeting hosted by Czemerynski, Springville-Griffith Institute has information on its website under athletics about

its policies regarding head injury and concussion. The information is a combination of recommendations from the State Board of Regents, State Education Department, Department of Health and the Concussion Management and Awareness Act.

Czemerynski offers advice to those who have a history with head trauma from a contact or collision sport.

"I tell them that they should consider a non-contact sport," he said. "Here at Springville, we offer a whole variety of them like swimming and tennis. These are other viable options for the student who wishes to participate in high school athletics."

Evans is taking that advice and now spends his athletic high school participation in cross country and track, while still finding a way to be involved in wrestling. He helps mentor 6-to-13-year-olds as a youth coach with a wrestling club in Lancaster.

"I thought at first that I didn't want to be around wrestling anymore because it would make it worse. But staying away was just so hard," Evan said. "Getting involved in coaching is the next best thing and it's really helping me adjust to missing it," Evans said.

Different levels of football leagues continue to make recent news regarding head injuries. America's oldest and largest youth football organization that is named after Springville-born Pop Warner, announced new changes Feb. 28 that appear to mitigate head-to-head contact that affect four levels of the organization beginning with Tiny Mites through Pee Wee.

One of the new rules set to be enforced this fall is the abolishment of

the three-point stance for the first three age groups that include Tiny Mite (5-7 years old), Mitey Mite (7-9 years old) and Junior Pee Wee (8-10 years old). This new rule disallows a player from putting a hand on the ground for leverage before a snap. Instead, players must be upright or in a modified squat position with their hands on their legs.

The other rule change is not new but has been extended for this fall for a fourth age group – Pee Wee (9-11 years old). While Pop Warner Youth Football banned kickoffs in 2016 for Tiny Mites, Mitey Mites and Junior Pee Wee players, the ban will now extend to Pee Wees. For these groups, the ball is placed on the 35-yard line following a score or to start a half. The rule is designed to avoid full-speed contact and maximize safety.

Professional, college and high school football teams are also adopting new guidelines to limit full-contact activity. One of the most stringent came from the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association that regulates its state's high school football just weeks before the Pop Warner announcement. They have limited full-contact activity for high school players from 60 minutes-per-week to 15 during the season and reduced preseason contact to six hours including scrimmages.

One Western New York football little league announced March 11 that it cut its full-contact 66 percent from the weekly established 90-minute guideline from USA Football. The Cheektowaga Little Loops Association is limiting full contact for 12-14-year-olds to 30 minutes a week, according to CLL Chairman Joe D'Amaro.

More information can be found online at springvillegi.org/district-athletics/concussion-management/ or at [springvillegi.org/district-](http://springvillegi.org/district-athletics/concussion-management/)

[athletics/return-to-play-protocol.](#)