

WWE star wrestler Matt Morgan holds special event to buy protective helmets for Lyman High football team

[Martin E. Comas](#)

Orlando Sentinel

Mar 09, 2019 | 7:00 AM



Lyman High School football coach Dennis Thomas is pictured with new helmets in the equipment room at the school in Longwood on Thursday, March 7, 2019. (Stephen M. Dowell/Orlando Sentinel)

Longwood City Commissioner Matt Morgan has gotten plenty of knocks to the head as a professional WWE superstar wrestler and high school football player.

Those blows have led to at least 21 concussions throughout his life, he said. That's why Morgan wants to make sure high school football

players today have their heads well protected when they're on the gridiron.

On Saturday, Morgan will use his star power as a former professional wrestler to take part in the Reiter Park Rumble, a fundraising event he helped organize to buy special football helmets for the Lyman High School football team that help minimize the risks of concussions.

"For me this is a very important topic," said Morgan, 42. "The pounding that they're taking is frightening. ...And these special 'flex' helmets protects their heads a little more and help prevent concussions."

No helmet can fully prevent serious head or neck injuries a player can sustain while playing football. However, the SpeedFlex helmets are designed to disperse energy from a blow and reduce the risk of trauma to the athlete's head, according to Riddell, the manufacturer.

Even so, a growing number of high school students are holding off on playing football as concerns from parents mount over concussions and other brain injuries.

According to a recent report in JAMA Pediatrics, the number of high school students playing football has dropped nearly 5 percent from 1.1 million athletes in 2008 to 1.06 million in 2017.

Researchers point to the increasing amount of media coverage highlighting that repeated blows to an athlete's head can lead to chronic traumatic encephalopathy or CTE — a degenerative condition associated with aggression, memory loss, dementia, personality disorders and suicide.

In a hospital survey conducted by the Tampa Bay Times, concussions caused by playing football have shot up among children to 1,000 cases in 2015 from about 600 in 2010.

Central Florida football coaches and athletic directors said they take extra steps every season to upgrade their players' equipment, including helmets, to make sure they're safe.

However, the problem is the cost. Equipment for high school sports programs — whether it's football, soccer, lacrosse, swimming, baseball or basketball — are funded by boosters, ticket sales and fundraisers, rather than the school district.

Each "Speedflex" helmet can cost up to \$450 each. And a large high school can have up to 100 students playing freshman, junior varsity and varsity football.



Lyman High School football coach Dennis Thomas is pictured with new helmets in the equipment room at the school in Longwood on Thursday, March 7, 2019. (Stephen M. Dowell/Orlando Sentinel) (Stephen M. Dowell/Orlando Sentinel)

That's why Dennis Thomas, head football coach of Lyman High School, is pleased Morgan is using his name recognition to provide the

additional headgear to his players.

"I'm very grateful," Thomas said. "Anything we can do to make the game safer. These helmets aren't the be all and end all to prevent concussions. But hopefully it will make the game safer for our students."

His football program already has 17 "SpeedFlex" helmets, and Morgan is hoping to provide another two dozen. Thomas said the special helmets are first given to athletes who have suffered previous concussions and then the quarterbacks and running backs.

Jay Getty, athletic director for Hagerty High School in Oviedo, said his school has 23 "SpeedFlex" helmets, along with 52 helmets fitted with computerized sensors that measure concussion hits and tell coaches on the sidelines when players need to be pulled out of a game.

"We spend about \$9,000 a year to ensure the safety of student athletes," Getty said. "The obvious goal is to have kids wear the best available helmets each year."

But Getty said he's seen a drop in high school students wanting to play football. He attributes it partly to fewer kids signing up for the youth leagues such as Pop Warner. He added that today's high school student has other sports options rather than just football.

Don Hogan, athletic director for the Lake County school district, was unable to say how many of his county's eight high school football programs use the special helmets because each program buys and pays for the refurbishment of its own equipment apart from the school district.

"But I can tell you that's one of their biggest expenses," Hogan said. "And the concussion issue is very big right now.Everyone is now talking about safety."

The better, more protective helmets bring a higher cost and "that's not a realistic expenditure" for smaller and less affluent high schools, Hogan said.

In the Orange County school district, about 2,100 students play high school football in 20 varsity programs, school officials said. Almost all of the schools use the SpeedFlex helmets to some extent — some schools have a few of the helmets and others are almost fully outfitted, according Doug Patterson, senior administrator for athletics and activities.

Patterson added that the SpeedFlex helmets are affordably priced and are also the highest rated by Virginia Tech, which rates football helmets based on reducing concussion risks.

"The district is always looking for ways to prevent injuries to our student athletes," Patterson said.

Patterson added he "has not had a single parent contact him" about the risk of concussions in high school football in the past three years.

Michael Dougherty, clinical coordinator for AdventHealth's sports concussion program and a certified athletic trainer, said "the jury is still out" on whether the special helmets can provide extra protection and reduce the number of concussions.

"A helmet or any other protective equipment can't prevent a

concussion," Dougherty said. "We don't want the athletes, coaches and parents to be lured into a false sense of security that a helmet is anti- concussion. The hope is that [the better helmets] will lessen those forces" that cause concussions and other head injuries.

Football programs should also work toward reducing the number of high-velocity hits during practice and games, he said. Football programs should also teach better tackling techniques, such as athletes not using their heads as weapons when tackling.

A human brain isn't fully developed until age 25 and teenagers take longer to recover from a brain injury, such as a concussion, than adults, Dougherty said.

"I think where you are finding the debate is whether there should be tackle football in high school," he said. "I don't know if we have the right answer yet."



Former WWE wrestler Matt Morgan at his Longwood home on Friday, Dec. 21, 2018. rgan is now a Longwood city commissioner. (Joe Burbank/Orlando Sentinel) 3068144 (Joe Burbank/Orlando Sentinel)

Morgan said he knows firsthand the danger of repeated blows to the

head. That's why he's agreed to donate his brains to medical researchers after he dies.

Latest Sports



"I was very shocked when I found out that [Lyman High School] didn't have these helmets [for all the players]," Morgan said on why he's holding the fundraiser. "Frankly I don't blame a parent who won't let their kid play football."

Because of incorrect information provided to the Sentinel, an earlier version of this story misstated the number of SpeedFlex helmets used in Orange County schools.

mcomas@orlandosentinel.com

- [Football](#)
- [Orange County](#)
- [Virginia Tech](#)



Martin E.Comas covers Seminole County and its seven cities at the Orlando Sentinel. Martin is a UCF graduate with degrees in journalism and business administration. He is fluent in Spanish.

**Trending Weekly
Newsletter - Orlando
Sentinel**

**Get a quick-read digest
of the stories that were
of most interest to
Central Floridians each
week.**