

Is heading dangerous? An update

Is heading a soccer dangerous? The question was raised after the death of a suburban Philadelphia soccer player. Susan Fitzgerald, writing in the Sept. 16th Philadelphia Inquirer included the following information.

The debate began in the late 1980's with first of several studies that suggest that the cumulative effects of repeated heading may cause brain damage.

Researchers studying some professional Norwegian soccer players found that a substantial proportion of them demonstrated deficits in tests to measure mental skills.

Another study of teenage and young adult soccer players by Adrienne Witol, a neuropsychologist at Virginia Commonwealth University's Medical College of Virginia found that those players who headed the ball most frequently had on average a lower IQ than players who did not head as much.

The study presented in the summer at the American Psychological Association's annual meeting has yet to be published in a peer reviewed journal and some experts have criticized the design and methodology of it and the Norwegian research.

The latest word on the ongoing debate came last March from researchers at UCLA. They compared a group of male U.S. National Team soccer players to elite track athletes to see if repetitive heading of the ball caused either symptoms of brain injury or changes in the brain that could be detected by MRI scans. They found no differences between the two groups. Soccer organizations cite the UCLA study as sound evidence that the worry over heading is unwarranted. Bob Contiguglia, past president of the USYSA, notes that well before soccer took off in the United States, it was being played with passion in other countries.

If heading were a problem, we'd know it by now, he said.

But some researchers believe the issue is still not resolved.

Thomas Toppino, a psychology professor at Villanova University, is studying more than 200 students who played organized sports in high school or college to see if there are any differences in the soccer player's abilities to perform mental tasks such as processing information and staying focused.

Toppino said he did not think the studies to date, which pointed to potential problems, were convincing and said he saw "no cause for immediate alarm."

Even so, there is some evidence that heading might be an issue, so we should treat it seriously and do some research, he said.

Experts say that parents should not treat soccer or any organized sport like a baby-sitting service, and that they should keep an eye on what their child is up to.

John McShane, director of primary care sports medicine at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital and medical team physician for the Philadelphia Eagles, "said that if a child complains of dizziness, headache, nausea, or blurry vision, he should come out of the game immediately." "One of the problems is that coaches aren't always qualified enough or objective enough to make those decisions, he said."