

School looks to stay a step ahead of concussions

Written by Wauneta Breeze

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Co-football coach Joseph Frecks, left, asks football team members to raise their hands with questions before starting the ImPACT test.

By Diane Stamm

The Wauneta Breeze

While many athletes from previous generations look back on their playing careers and remember the hard knocks as part of the game, government and school officials are now looking for ways to ensure today's athletes remain safe through the rough and tumble games.

“As a society, we are becoming much more aware of and educated about the dangers of concussions, especially in adolescents,” said Wauneta-Palisade co-football coach Joseph Frecks. “In response, the State of Nebraska has passed concussion legislation (LB 260-Nebraska Concussion Awareness Act), which says that all coaches must have concussion education, and all athletes and parents must be provided with concussion information. It also sets guidelines for removing athletes from play when symptoms of a concussion are shown, and return to play protocols to follow (written authorization from an appropriate health care professional, and parent must be obtained before an athlete can return to competition).”

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The Wauneta-Palisade school is taking the law a step further by providing ImPACT testing for its students.

ImPACT testing stands for Immediate Post-Concussion Assessment and Cognitive Testing. It is an online test that measures cognitive functions, including: attention span, working memory, non-verbal problem solving and reaction time.

“ImPACT testing assists in making more consistent and objective decisions about athletes being allowed to return after a concussion,” according to principal/co-sports director Troy Holmberg.

Athletes complete a baseline test, which Wauneta-Palisade students did last week, that provides information that can be used to help determine if an athlete has a concussion and how bad the concussion is. It can be used to help health care professionals determine when the athlete may begin participating again. Results are saved on a secure, HIPPA compliant server, and are available to be accessed if an athlete sustains a head injury requiring post-injury testing.

All high school and junior high students involved in athletic activities and physical education classes will take part in the testing. Students not participating in athletic activities may still take the ImPACT test.

Anyone may administer the baseline test as long as they've had training, but a health care professional must release the athlete before they may return to participation.

“The test will not determine whether or not an athlete can return to play after a concussion,” said co-football coach Joseph Frecks. “It is only a tool to be used by a proper healthcare professional to help them determine if the athlete is ready to return to play.”

Frecks was trained to administer the test at his previous school, Sandhills/Thedford. He now coordinates the W-P program. Basketball coach Betsy Johanson and volleyball coach Michelle

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Harchelroad received training at July's Nebraska Coaches Association coaches clinic.

Harchelroad said discussion during the hour and a half class involved the concepts behind the test to go with how the test worked and how to administer the test.

The Nebraska Sports Concussion Network, nebsportsconcussion.org, and Good Samaritan Hospital, a member of the Network, are funding ImPACT testing. The testing is free of charge to athletes in grades 9-12 in collision and contact sports. The school will pay \$5/test for all other student athletes receiving the test, according to Holmberg. All junior high athletes will also be tested, added Frecks.

"I want to express appreciation to the Nebraska Sports Concussion Network and Good Samaritan Hospital for providing both monetary and professional assistance," said Holmberg. "I also want to emphasize that this is one tool used to address concussion issues. Our Board approved new football helmets for the 2011 season. Our coaches have worked to promote weight lifting/fitness training to better prepare athletes for the rigor of competition and coaches are competing an online 'concussion in sports' course."

"We are very fortunate to be able to administer this type of baseline testing to our athletes," said Frecks. "Even though there is no way to completely prevent concussions in sports, we want to do everything we can to ensure the safety of our athletes, and this a great tool to help us do that."

"The bottom line is we value our kids, and want to do everything we can to ensure their safety, especially when it comes to concussions," emphasized Frecks.

According to the ImPACT website, <http://impacttest.com/>, ImPACT is currently used for concussion management services at more than 1,000 high schools, colleges, sports medicine centers, and professional teams throughout the world.

More information on concussions can be found at the Center for Disease Control's website, <http://www.cdc.gov/concussion/>, and more information for LB 620 can be found at the Nebraska

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Health and Human Services website,
<http://dhhs.ne.gov/publichealth/concussion/Pages/LB620.aspx>.