

Treating the Football Athlete

Coaches' Perspective from the University of Michigan



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KEYWORDS

• Football injuries • Concussion • Sports medicine • Coach philosophy • Athletes

KEY POINTS

- The management of player safety and injury prevention in collision sports is of public health concern.
- A football coach may have a large role in advocating for player safety and creating a team culture emphasizing healthy injury management.
- An athlete's well-being can be influenced by a coach's practice, game, and decision-making philosophy.
- Healthy football injury management can be maximized through optimal collaboration with medical professionals and use of resources.

INTRODUCTION

It is undisputed that football is one of the most popular sports in the United States, with approximately 3 million youth, 1 million high school, and 100,000 college participants annually.¹ The sport is known for its competitive emphasis on physicality and toughness, which contributes to the creation of the nation's most dynamic and specialized athletes. However, sports medicine research has demonstrated that football has one of the highest risks of overall injury of all American sports, and that this risk increases with the level of competition.¹⁻⁴ Epidemiologic studies evaluating

injury rates at both collegiate and professional levels have shown that the majority of injuries are sustained as a result of high-energy player-to-player contact. The demonstrated high incidences of musculoskeletal and concussive injuries sustained by football players suggests that optimal injury management is of public health concern, especially in athletes at the highest levels of competition.⁵

From a medical standpoint, the football player is a unique patient. In addition to maintaining traditional patient-physician communication, a physician treating a highly competitive football player must balance communication within a wider

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network of stakeholders, which may include coaches, trainers, and other team-related staff. Research suggests that the roles of assistant and head coaches can extend beyond technical instruction and that, if an athlete perceives that their coach is supportive of responsible injury recognition and rehabilitation, they may be more likely to report an injury.⁶ However, a coach's perspective on establishing a team culture valuing injury prevention is largely unexplored. This article aims to obtain the perspectives of Jim Harbaugh and Jedd Fisch (Fig. 1), head and assistant coaches of the University of Michigan football program, on the injury management of a highly competitive Division 1 football team within the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). We identify successful components of a competitive football team in relation to policy enforcement, coaching philosophy, and medical communication and investigate how these components can maximize the well-being of student-athletes (Fig. 2).

POLICY EVOLUTION

Policy administration is one of the most effective methods of protecting and advocating for the health and safety of football players. The majority of recent policy modifications and additions provide guidelines for the management of concussions and injuries to the head (Fig. 3), which consist of roughly 7% to 10% of all football injuries.^{1,3,5} Concussions pose significant challenges to medical staff, in that they do not present with consistent symptoms. Although sideline tools such as the Sport Concussion Assessment Tool (SCAT) have been developed, an objective and universal

diagnostic tool does not exist.⁷ Furthermore, concussion diagnosis strongly relies on the athlete's accurate reporting of symptoms, which can be hindered by factors such as inadequate understanding of concussion symptoms or concerns about losing playing time.^{5,8} For these reasons, current trends in football research focus on the study of concussions in an effort to create management policies, playing rules, and practice guidelines that advocate for optimal player safety without sacrificing the physicality of the sport.

Football management associations at all levels have addressed the growing concern of concussion management through the development of a wide range of policies. In April 2010, the NCAA created the NCAA Concussion Policy and Legislation, which mandates implementation of a concussion management plan at each participating institution. This policy requires management plans to detail provisions of concussion education for all student-athletes, promptly removing athletes experiencing head trauma from competition, and prohibiting return to play for at least 24 hours.⁹ Additionally, the policy mandates that all players diagnosed with a concussion be medically cleared by a physician before returning to athletic activities.⁹ Jedd Fisch indicated that concussion awareness is a large component of the health policy evolution he has witnessed throughout his coaching experiences, and stated, "I could think of 2008, when we had some pretty significant concussions when I was at Denver, to now currently, and the concussion protocol has changed substantially. The return-to-play has also changed substantially, in regards to involving the independent neurologist, not the team doctor. If an athlete



Fig. 1. (A) Jim Harbaugh, University of Michigan football head coach with Dr Kevin Chung. (B) Jedd Fisch, University of Michigan football passing game coordinator/quarterbacks/wide receivers coach. (Courtesy of [B] University of Michigan Football, Ann Arbor, MI; with permission.)

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