

COACHING NIGHTMARES BLOWOUTS

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SECTION: SPORTS

HEADLINE: Blowout ethics: When a high school game is decided by 60 points, no one really wins

BYLINE: Brian VanderBeek, The Modesto Bee, Calif.

Oct. 13--Within a span of six games, Modesto Christian High has absorbed and delivered the worst competitive experience in high school football:

The blowout.

Since the 2004 season, there have been 20 games in the California Interscholastic Federation Sac-Joaquin Section decided by 60 or more points. Of those, 10 have been Central Catholic victories and seven have been Big Valley Christian losses, including last weekend's 87-0 whipping by Vacaville Christian.

In the 2005 Division V final, Modesto Christian lost to Central Catholic 84-6 -- the most lopsided title game in section history. But this season, the Modesto Christian's Crusaders are 5-0 and winning by an average score of 54-10, including a 68-0 victory over Le Grand on Sept.29.

The results have put the Crusaders' head coach Mike Parsons in a philosophical bind. His first-string players need playing time to get ready for the school's first season in the Trans-Valley League. But he also knows the need to keep scores out of the humiliation zone.

"It's no good on either side," Parsons said. "When you lose a game like we did against Central Catholic, it's disheartening because you've worked so hard.

"When you're on the winning side, your guys still have worked hard, but you have to take your starters out at halftime. It makes you think about finding ways to not run up the score."

One interesting moment in last year's Division V title game occurred when a small group of Central Catholic fans started a chant urging their Raiders to go for 100 points. The Central Catholic staff ignored the fans, and most the Modesto Christian players and coaches walked away believing Central was not trying to run up the score. That queasy blowout feeling was revisited when Modesto Christian's side of the scoreboard got heavy against Le Grand.

"When we ran our plays against Central, they were just so much stronger and faster than us," Crusader quarterback Jesse White said. "Central humbled us, so we did feel for Le Grand because we had been there."

It's a natural reaction to cringe and feel sympathy for the vanquished when you see a grossly lopsided final. The second reflex then becomes the accusation that the winning team must have padded the score.

Right or wrong, those are the perceptions.

"Everybody wants competitive equity and fair play," said Cynthia Jewell, Modesto Christian High School principal. "Blowouts don't offer a chance for players on either team to demonstrate their talent."

"I'm confident our coaches have safeguards in place that will ensure they're not playing the starters the entire game."

If a team with a huge lead continues to throw the ball deep or leaves its first team in the game well into the fourth quarter, the role of coaches as teachers should be questioned, said Jim Thompson, executive director of the Positive Coaching Alliance in Palo Alto.

"I don't see running up the score as an ethical issue, I see it as lacking class," Thompson said. "Cheating is an ethical issue -- using ineligible players or taking steroids. Sports is greatest when you have evenly matched teams, and you can't always have that."

"The bottom line is that getting blown out is not the worst thing in the world. You always learn more from your losses than from your wins."

Calling off the dogs

As a blowout game develops, the head coach is expected to recognize when to pull in the reins.

"You do it by feel," Central Catholic coach Mike Glines said. "There have been games where I've instructed our players to fumble but warned them to not make it look intentional."

Last Friday at Amador, Central Catholic scored 20 consecutive points to open the second half, turning a close game into a 47-12 victory. The Raiders were able to slow their momentum in the fourth quarter.

"There's an unwritten rule that you don't run the score up, but it's interpreted differently by every coach," Parsons said. "Sometimes, one coach might think a 30-point lead is enough, while the next coach might think it's 50 points."

Parsons follows his rule. If his team is leading by 21 points or more in the fourth quarter, he pulls back on offense.

"I have a coach on my staff who is in charge of making sure I'm aware of our own 21-point rule," Parsons said. "In that situation, we're subbing heavily."

"We were up by a lot of points at halftime against Turlock Christian last year and we called off the dogs. The next thing you know, they scored 35 points on us and I had to put the starters back in because it was getting too close."

There also is the matter of being fair to the starters. Most are seniors who have waited three years for their chance to get the bulk of the playing time.

"We were beating Le Grand by 47 at halftime, and after a week of working hard, we got benched at the end of the second quarter," said Modesto Christian's White.

Connecticut was the first state to adopt a rule on margins of victory. Any coach whose team wins by more than 50 points faces a one-week suspension.

The first time the rule was invoked, it lost its teeth.

After his team defeated Bassick High 56-0, the Bridgeport Center coach was suspended. The suspension was overturned when the coach was able to show the score was not the result of unsportsmanlike action.

"There is a line there," said John Williams, assistant commissioner of the Sac-Joaquin Section. "Is it 30 points, 40, or 50, or is it changing your style of play? If you're a team that passes on every play, do you stop passing? At what point do you put in your second team?"

A new Northern Virginia rule says that when a team builds a 35-point lead in the second half, the clock runs without stopping.

California has a mercy rule for baseball and softball ending games when one team leads by 10 or more runs after five innings.

In basketball, games switch to running-clock mode when one team leads by 40 points in the fourth quarter.

But in football, the clock rule is optional. At any point, coaches can agree to set the clock in constant motion.

"It's the losing team's job to ask for the running clock," Parsons said. "It's his job to say his kids have had enough, and I'd hate to have to ask a coach if he'd want to do that."

"It's not often that you are surprised by a blowout," Thompson said. "A coach has a pretty good idea going into the game that they may be a lot better or worse than the other team."

Kids keep playing all out

Big Valley Christian knew Vacaville Christian was a strong team, based on Vacaville's 80-8 victory in 2005.

In last Friday's game, Vacaville rolled to a 69-0 lead at halftime. The coaches let the clock run in the second half. At no point did either coach tell the kids to stop playing hard.

"If you don't block or tackle, the other team can score a lot of points, and that's what can happen," Big Valley Christian coach Larry Shimel said. He never expected the other team to stop trying and didn't accuse Vacaville of piling on the points.

"If there's a blowout in baseball, do you tell your batters to not swing at the ball?," he said. "Vacaville ran everything really well."

Big Valley Christian is in its third season of varsity football, still seeking its first victory. In its first year, 2004, it was outscored 613-12 in 10 games -- the widest margin in state history.

"We always try to play to the best of our ability," Shimel said, noting no player has quit as a result of the defeats. "The Vacaville game was helpful to us, but only if we learn from it. Champions come back from this kind of thing."

Above all, the coaching staff must keep players safe, overseeing physical training and teaching proper techniques.

"Blowout games can be teachable moments," Thompson said. "Talk to your players about how to comport themselves when they're getting killed. Talk about character, about fighting until the whistle blows and about not letting the score determine how hard you play."

But what's the right response for a coach who knows he's taking his kids into a physical mismatch?

For Kyle Tobin, head coach at Oscoda (Mich.) Area High School, the answer was to end the season.

Oscoda lost its first four games this season by a total margin of 164-0. Tobin, who coached another school to the state championship, asked the school board to stop the season for the players' safety. The board agreed.

"Shame on me for being callous, but if it's that much of a blowout at the half, then maybe some schools shouldn't be playing football," Glines said. "Not every school is ready for a football program."

In last season's Division V final, Modesto Christian never stopped hitting, and Central Catholic's reserves never stopped trying to run the game plan.

"It's never a positive to get beat that bad," Modesto Christian tight end Zach Sudfeld said. "But you can take a lot out of it. It makes you work your hardest in the offseason to get better, and I guess that's a positive."

Then there is the perception that remains after a blowout.

A team winning by 60 or more points automatically will be accused of running up the score when, in many cases, coaches did all they could to subdue scoring.

"I want our program to be perceived as being full of character and integrity," Parsons said.

"We don't want to embarrass anybody. We're going 100 miles an hour, and all of the sudden I'm supposed to know the exact right time to slam on the brakes. It's not that easy."

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COACHING NIGHTMARES SPORTSMENSHIP?

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HEADLINE: DISTRICT APOLOGIZES TO ATHLETE FOR RACIAL SLUR;
CAZENOVIA STUDENT SAID IT WHILE SHAKING HANDS WITH SOLVAY STUDENT
AFTER GAME.

BYLINE: By Debra J. Groom Staff writer

The Cazenovia school district athletic department is apologizing to a Solvay High School student and the Solvay athletic department for the use of a racial slur after a football game.

Cazenovia athletic director Michael Byrnes said he had apologized over the phone to Solvay athletic director John Dippold and junior varsity football player Jeremy T. Parker, 15, a ninth-grader. An apology letter also will be sent to Dippold and Parker, he said.

Jeremy's father, Melvin Parker, said the "N-word" was used toward his son when the Solvay and Cazenovia junior varsity teams were shaking hands after the Oct. 20 game at Solvay.

Parker said a student approached his son and said "good game," followed by the slur.

He said Jeremy threw his helmet on the ground in anger and told his mother, Edna Preston, what had happened.

Parker said Preston complained to Cazenovia coaches John Fontana and Mark Evans. Fontana and Evans did not return messages left at school Thursday.

Byrnes said Cazenovia officials are trying to identify who said the offensive word.

"They have been very apologetic," said Dippold, the Solvay athletic director. "They've been very good during the whole thing, and they are trying to find out who it was."

He said this incident is no reflection on the Cazenovia athletic program.

Melvin Parker said he will accept the apology letter from Cazenovia. He said he believes school officials know who the student is.

Cazenovia Superintendent Robert Dubik said when the student is identified, "we will address it. We don't take anything like that lightly."

Byrnes agreed. "We are continuing to try to find out who it was. When we do, he's in trouble."

Byrnes said even though no one from Solvay or Cazenovia can identify the player involved, Cazenovia officials believe the incident occurred.

"We don't have any reason to believe it didn't happen," Byrnes said. "This is embarrassing for the team."

Dippold said he's talked to Jeremy and "he's as OK as you can be."

"It's very unfortunate for anyone to hear that," Dippold said.

Jeremy Parker and his mother could not be reached Thursday.

Byrnes said the JV team meets every Thursday to talk with coaches about values. "We have never had to deal with a situation like this before," he said.

Cazenovia won the game 42-14 to finish an undefeated season.

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COACHING NIGHTMARES COACHING?

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SECTION: SURPRISE REPUBLIC; KIDS AND SPORTS; Pg. 38

HEADLINE: FORGET BAD FOOTBALL COACH AND FIND ANOTHER TEAM

BYLINE: TOM KUYPER, Special for The Republic

Question: My son has just finished his first season playing for an area youth football team, and are we glad it is over. I never thought there would be that much frustration with a youth team.

Our problem was with the way the kids were treated, and we are not sure how to handle it for future sports.

We paid a lot of money for my son to play a sport he has always loved.

He had missed only one practice all year and would give it his all every practice (some days he was tired, but for a 6-year-old that is expected). Yet he would play only one or two plays a game.

Many other kids also sat the bench.

I realize when he gets older that maybe an expectation, but for an e-team I feel that is unacceptable. I feel that every child on the team should have equal playing time, especially since they don't even keep score!

The coach also had a tendency to ignore the horseplay until it got too bad and then would yell.

My son's jersey was grabbed angrily during a game by the coach because he missed a tackle and then was taken out.

My husband and I grew up playing sports and know how competitive it can be and how coaches can be. We are just having difficulty on how to deal with the problem.

My son wants to play for a different team next year, and I feel it's important for him to play where he will be around fellow classmates. Any suggestions?

Answer: It's time to punt. It's fourth down, and too long! You are with the wrong coach, maybe even the wrong league. You have made every effort to fulfill your commitment both to the team and teaching your son the meaning of perseverance.

This is the learning process of youth sports. Sometimes our kids have great coaches and winning seasons, and some seasons are filled with lots of losses and bad coaches. Being a part of all these circumstances provides growth and maturity.

You have served your time. Now it's time to move on.

This coach needs to understand some of my basics:

- * At age 6, come on, every kid needs to play ... a lot!

"Perfectly equal time" may be difficult to facilitate, but every kid should be coming in and out.

Even the best player, or the ones who stand out at this age, need to come out and be a part of the substitution rotation.

- * Winning at this age needs to take a back seat to teaching fundamentals, game strategies, teamwork and fun.

They're not even keeping score. What is he doing? Double penalty to him!

- * Kids all progress at different ages and phases of their lives. That is why coaches should not give up on the ones who appear to be less talented.

- * Kids have a huge need to feel like they have contributed and are an important part of the team. Significant playing time helps meet this need.

- * When a coach gives playing time, this is also giving a sense of trust and confidence, which is a great way to encourage and motivate.

- * At this age, one of the big coaching essentials is to create an atmosphere that encourages kids to enjoy sports and being a part of a team. This gets them grounded in knowing the importance of a healthy lifestyle and gets them out there moving and building the habit of being physically active.

Are the league officials aware of this coach's style? They need to be.

Chalk this one up as a learning experience, and then move on. Don't worry about his friends. I would ask them to consider moving with you.

Punt!

COACHING NIGHTMARES CONCUSSIONS

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All Editions

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HEADLINE: HEAD GAMES;

Teen athletes more susceptible to concussions and their lasting effects

BYLINE: By ADAM ZAGORIA, Herald News, North Jersey Media Group

LITTLE FALLS — Passaic Valley quarterback Jim Niland kept the football on an option play to the left during a Sept. 16 game at Newark West Side. As he was tackled by several West Side defenders, one player hit Niland helmet-to-helmet, causing him to fall unconscious to the ground.

"Amazingly, he held onto the football," Hornets coach Angelo DeSalvo said. "When you watch the film it almost looked as if he might've been unconscious before he hit the ground."

"I don't even remember getting hit," Niland recalled. "I remember when I woke up (after 30 or 40 seconds) everyone was around me."

Though one can sustain a concussion without falling unconscious, it was clear to Passaic Valley trainer Deb Dross that Niland had suffered one. A concussion is a mild traumatic brain injury induced by mechanical forces that immediately disrupt the normal functioning of the brain, according to the Brain Injury Association of New Jersey. After the injury, Niland's parents took him to St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center.

Though the scene was especially scary for Niland, his family and friends, coaches and teammates, it is not unique. About 19 percent of all high school football players will suffer a concussion this season, experts say. There are 300,000 reported concussions every year in the United States, and another 750,000-1.5 million go unreported, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"It's difficult to know what's a real number or not, and I'm not even sure that a real number is critically important. There are a lot of them out there," said Dr. Stephen Rice, a concussion expert from the Jersey Shore University Medical Center.

"The bottom line is, you get only one brain that functions like a sophisticated computer. And when you get hurt, respect your brain and give it time to heal. You can try to gimp around on a knee that's not working so great, and maybe later on you'll need a little surgery to repair it. But they don't make replacements for brains."

Concussions have driven professional athletes like Garfield native and former Jets wideout Wayne Chrebet from the playing field, but it is high school athletes about whom we should be especially concerned. Teen athletes are more vulnerable than adults because their brains and nervous systems take longer to recover. After one concussion, teens can be three times as likely to suffer permanent injury. After three concussions, they are nine times more likely.

"I think (concussions) happen more often than people admit, depending on what level you work at," said Dross, who has worked as a trainer for 18 years. "The pressure is to the point that the athlete doesn't want to admit it.

"It's instilled in them from the coach's perspective that it's important that they're back on the field or they feel that they're going to lose their position if they're not back out there. It depends on the intensity of the situation, whether it's a practice or the pressure of a game."

Symptoms

During a recent seminar on concussions in Somerset, Rice said that the "hallmark (of a concussion) is confusion," which can manifest itself in a number of ways. Post-traumatic amnesia, retrograde amnesia, disorientation, a vacant stare, an inability to focus, slurred or incoherent speech and excessive drowsiness are all cognitive signs. The victim may also complain of headaches, fatigue, dizziness, nausea or vomiting and visual disturbances.

"Your brain is just not sharp and clear," Rice said. "You can't concentrate and focus, and that's the real proof of the pudding of what's going on."

On top of understanding the "red flags" of head injuries, Rice told a room full of school nurses at the seminar that they need to know what their student-athletes are like normally so that they can compare their behavior after a potential concussion.

Experts agree that it's important for all the relevant parties to be on the same page when treating a concussion.

"It's very, very important that you communicate with everyone that's involved with this athlete, from the parents to the coaches to the teachers to their physician and let them know they've had a head injury," Rice told the nurses.

ImPACT testing

A computerized test developed at the University of Pittsburgh Medical School for professional football and hockey teams known as ImPACT is very useful in determining concussions. The test is similar to a video game. It gauges attention span, verbal and visual memory, processing speed and reaction time to one-hundredth of a second.

The Brain Injury Association of New Jersey offered grants to 100 New Jersey high schools to start using ImPACT, but only 35 showed interest. Ten schools in North Jersey received grants, including DePaul Catholic, Lyndhurst and Pequannock. The program costs about \$1,300 and the grant is worth half that much.

The Association is offering a second round of matching grants, with hopes of awarding another 65 matching grants this winter, said spokesperson Caroline Leipf. Applications and information are posted on the group's Web site (www.sportsconcussion.com) and a mailing to announce the availability of the grants will be sent to high school principals and athletic trainers this month.

For schools that don't implement the program, local athletes can utilize the Chilton Memorial Hospital's Sports Medicine Division, which is offering ImPACT testing as of this fall.

Dr. Paul Ostergaard is the team doctor for the Pequannock football team. He is currently holding out six Pequannock athletes, including four football players, for concussions and said that last year he treated 12-15, or 20-25 percent of the team for concussions.

This fall he treated Passaic Valley's Niland using the ImPACT system.

Ostergaard said he became interested in concussion management five years ago when he arrived at a Pequannock football game and was told by the trainer that a player had suffered a concussion a few days earlier, but was expected to play a big role in the game.

"I had no way of validating whether it was safe for him to play," Ostergaard said. "There's a certain level of risk to the student as well as to the doctor and the school if something happens to this youngster in the game."

At that point Ostergaard began to do research and ultimately attended a seminar on ImPACT testing at Westchester University in Pennsylvania. In 2004, Pequannock mandated use of the program in its middle and high school.

Because Passaic Valley doesn't have ImPACT testing, Dross sent Niland to Ostergaard to be tested on a computer in his office in Pequannock. Niland had had no baseline testing, but Ostergaard used sequential testing to determine where he fit in for someone his age.

"He's pretty bright so he comes out in the 80th or 90th percentile in most categories," Ostergaard said. "If he's in the 70th percentile (after the concussion), you know something's wrong."

Niland said he had a headache until the Tuesday following the game. That day, Ostergaard tested him and later said his brain wasn't operating normally.

That week, Niland missed practice and said, "I was going crazy."

But by the second test that Friday, Ostergaard cleared him to resume aerobic testing but standard protocol required that a return to full play depended on his symptoms and ImPACT scores.

"Younger kids sometimes take two weeks to recover," Ostergaard said "The younger kids take longer to recover. A guy like Jim was able to get back in a week's time."

Second-Impact Syndrome

Ostergaard said that 40 percent of concussion victims recover in a week and another 40 percent require a second week.

"The rest of the 20 percent can take up to four months, depending on severity," he said. "And some can be left with permanent brain damage.

Rice said there are three key criteria for returning to play: (1) No symptoms of any kind at rest; (2) No symptoms of any kind with physical activity; and (3) Brain function that has returned to normal (ideally as measured by ImPACT or other neuropsychological testing).

That may mean no school, no homework, or additional time for tests or help taking notes.

"There is new evidence (from ImPACT) that shows if you go back to play too soon, your brain function does not return to normal readily, demonstrating unsatisfactory memory, concentration and reaction time," Rice said.

While sitting out a week or two is enough time for the brain to heal in 80 percent of cases, there is the danger of something called Second-Impact Syndrome.

"When you have a concussion and you're not back to normal yet, if you get a second hit you can just completely wipe out the auto-regulatory process," Rice said. "And you get immediate brain edema. So they get hit, they're OK for 10 seconds, and then nothing will save them because everything you do in the hospital to save them requires a normally working system. But the system is down.

"So most of these kids die."

Ostergaard is currently treating a Pequannock soccer player with Second-Impact syndrome who was cleared to play by his neurologist after his first concussion. After suffering his second in a high school game, he now has to take special education classes at home.

"Both the first hit and the second hit can happen on the same day," Rice said. "It rarely does, but it can. And that just reminds us that you don't want to send somebody back the first day who got hit in the head."

The future

According to Ostergaard, padded helmets such as The Riddell Revolution Football Helmet, are not the answer to protecting against concussions.

"That does not really reduce the frequency of concussion; it does reduce the severity a little bit," Ostergaard said.

Rather, Ostergaard said, education among coaches, trainers and physicians is the best way to cut down on the problem.

"We really believe it's important that doctors put this (ImPACT) software in their office," Ostergaard said. "That's where we think the future is. We think all doctors should make this part of a pediatric physical to get a baseline on children when they're 5 years of age.

"That's the future. And then when a child has a bicycle accident and comes in with a helmet injury, we can then do follow-up testing."

WHAT IS A CONCUSSION?

A concussion is a brain injury that:

Is caused by a bump, blow, or jolt to the head.

Can change the way your brain works.

Can range from mild to severe.

Can occur during practices or games in any sport.

Can happen even if you haven't been knocked out.

Can be serious even if you've just been "dinged" or had your "bell rung."

EARLY SYMPTOMS OF CONCUSSION INJURY:

(Within minutes or hours)

Nausea or vomiting

Balance problems or dizziness

Sensitivity to light and noise.

Lack of awareness of surroundings

Headache

LATER SYMPTOMS:

(Within days or weeks)

Poor concentration

Fatigue

Memory problems

Light-headedness

Sleep disturbances

Anxiety and depression what to do:

WHAT TO DO:

What should I do if I think I have a concussion?

Tell your coaches and your parents and get a medical checkup.

Tell your coach if you believe one of your teammates might have a concussion.

Give yourself time to recover. While your brain is still healing, you are much more susceptible to a second concussion. Second or later concussions can cause permanent brain damage and even death in rare cases.

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