



NFHS SPORTS MEDICINE ADVISORY COMMITTEE (SMAC)

POSITION STATEMENT REGARDING SOCCER HEADGEAR

OCTOBER 2007

The incidence of concussions in high school sports, including soccer, has been of interest and concern to the NFHS SMAC for many years. Data suggests that concussions in soccer, based on rate per exposure, are higher than any other non-helmeted sport. In recent years increased knowledge, awareness, and public attention has produced major changes in management of concussions. In addition, individuals, companies, and associations continue to search for methods of decreasing risk for our student athletes who play sports.

Significant changes in the definition, initial assessment, and methodology for return-to-play decisions of concussions have occurred over the last several years. New instruments such as neuropsychological testing and special imaging of the head have aided researchers and clinicians to better serve our student athletes. Research has confirmed that head injuries in soccer predominantly come from head to head, head to ground, head to goal post, and possibly ball to head on an inadvertent contact instead of from purposeful heading the ball. Industry has contributed the concept of padding the head to minimize the force delivered by a blow to the head. Data on biomechanical reduction in force is available and a recently published study in the field has suggested a decrease in concussions with use of such headgear. Other prospective studies are planned with larger numbers that may create a more substantial data base relative to the effect of headgear on the incidence of concussions.

At this time the use of soccer headgear is permitted but not required under the NFHS soccer rules. We know of no state that has chosen to require such use on a state-wide basis, though some schools or school districts may have done so for their own student athletes. A number of student athletes are using them of their own volition. Member state associations, school districts, schools, parents and students are free to make their own assessments relative to this piece of equipment.

The NFHS SMAC remains very interested in research and empirical observations with respect to the effect that the use of soccer headgear may have on the incidence and severity of concussions and other injuries, and on the mode of play. At this time the NFHS SMAC is comfortable that the present interpretation is reasonable, based on an ongoing review and analysis of the existing data and collaboration and discussion with experts in the field. As additional research and information becomes available, the NFHS SMAC will continue to evaluate the situation, share the information with the NFHS and member state associations, and determine the advisability of a change in the present position.

The NFHS and other rule-makers tend to move cautiously with respect to equipment mandates because unintended consequences (e.g. the possibility of more cervical injuries) are an ongoing concern. Towards that end, we continue to be interested in “on field” observations from the membership and from other interested parties about the use of headgear by high school soccer players. We have received few responses to date.

Risk management for our student athletes continues to be the primary goal and mission of the NFHS SMAC. We remain committed to that end.