

Lower Island Soccer Association (LISA) Proposal to Restrict Heading in Younger Age Groups

Research based evidence:

- Research on heading in youth soccer identifies that the way concussions occur in soccer is varied, and this includes head to ball contact at 12%, head to player contact at 40%, this includes contact with head, arms and legs, and head to ground or goal post contact at 10.3%.
- Other studies identify 40% of concussions occur during heading, with over 65% of boys and over 50% of girl's concussions resulting from player to player contact.
- Previous studies identify that heading is responsible for 31% to 37% of youth soccer related concussions and heading is the activity responsible for the highest proportion of concussions in boys at 30.6% and in girls at 25.3%.
- Although heading is the activity most frequently associated with concussions in soccer the research shows that athlete to athlete contact is most frequently the mechanism of injury
- There is also evidence to state that correct technique in heading can reduce concussion as a two-year study on US collegiate soccer found no instances of reported concussions from purposeful heading, rather concussions were reported when a player was accidentally struck with a high velocity ball.
- Other research suggests that intentional heading is not associated with concussions and that biomechanically the accelerations that result from heading are well below levels that cause mild brain traumatic injury.
- However, there is still a concern that the long-term practice of heading could have detrimental effects on brain functioning.
- Rates of concussion are significantly higher in competition than in training where many headers are not contested.
- As players become bigger and stronger and develop better heading technique the forces to the brain imparted by the ball are relatively reduced.
- Over inflated balls absorb less energy and more force is transmitted to the brain, balls should be deflated when teaching heading technique
- Currently there is insufficient evidence to recommend using headgear.
- Up to half of all youth sports related injuries may be preventable: banning heading is unlikely to eliminate athlete to athlete contact which is the cause of the majority of concussions, but the restricting of heading should eliminate some of the athlete contact to contact events.
- The risk of catastrophic head and neck injury in soccer is low compared to other sports, however the concussion risk is relatively high.
- The United States Soccer Federation (USSF) banned heading for players younger than 10 and limited the practice of heading for children ages 11 to 13 years
- Hockey Canada banned checking up to the peewee level (ages 11-12) a recognition that a high percentage of concussions are from physical contact.

Summary

Heading isn't bad, it's a part of the game and will be for the foreseeable future and soccer players have been heading soccer balls across the world for over 150 years. However, heading the ball can sometimes result in concussions, and player contact when heading or attempting to head the ball also results in concussions. We can't remove chaos from soccer as it's a dynamic sport. We can put in mechanisms to reduce heading, and by extension reduce concussions in our younger players, by restricting heading in games below the U13 age group.

Proposal

Based on the evidence provided by research and following the actions of Hockey Canada, who appear to recognize that physical contact leads to concussions, we would like to propose the banning of heading in all inter club, and in club games, up to and including the U12 age group. Although heading the ball isn't the major contributing factor to concussion in soccer, removing heading will also indirectly reduce the number of other factors in concussion injuries, head to player, and head to post.

Heading the ball will result in the awarding of an indirect free kick to the opposing team.

Heading will be allowed in the U13 age group and above.

We also propose no heading at practice in the age groups below U11 and suggest that heading the ball should be introduced at practice in the U11 age group under specific conditions.

LISA will develop a "Safe Introduction to Heading" program for coaches in the U11 age groups.

References

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