New Study Exposes Risk of Internal Organ Injuries Often Ignored in Youth Sports, Especially Football

Taylor Haugen Foundation Says Understanding the Research Can Help Better Protect High School and College Athletes in the Sports They Love

NICEVILLE, Fla. (PRWEB) September 10, 2019 -- A study from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is focusing much-needed attention on an often-overlooked concern in youth athletics: the potential severity of internal organ injuries suffered in contact sports such as football, ice hockey and lacrosse.

“This type of study has been long overdue, because the risk of severe internal injuries in youth sports is very real,” said Brian Haugen, who with his wife, Kathy, is all too familiar with one specific category of internal injury – the one involving damage to parts of the abdomen.

In 2008, the Haugens’ 15-year-old son, Taylor, suffered a ruptured liver while playing high school football. The traumatic abdominal injury proved fatal.

Not long after that tragedy, the Florida couple established the Taylor Haugen Foundation, which today is the leading advocate for better protection against abdominal injuries in sports, especially for athletes in America’s high schools.

The recent study sought to get a better handle on the incidence and characteristics of sports-related internal organ injuries, like the abdominal one suffered by Taylor Haugen and a variety of other sports injuries that affect internal organs of one type or another.

The data collected in the study indicated that nearly 20 high school and university athletes a year suffer a sports-related internal organ injury due to direct contact. The report concluded that although such injuries seldom occur, when they do happen, the results may be severe.

“Even one severe outcome is one too many,” Brian Haugen said, “especially when there are ways to better protect against such incidents.”

The highest internal organ injury rates reported in the study were in male contact sports, with football, lacrosse and ice hockey leading the way. Nine of the internal organ injuries were categorized as catastrophic, or the most severe. Of those nine, seven occurred in high school football. Four of the catastrophic internal organ injuries resulted in death and five led to semipermanent or permanent disability. Two of the fatalities were in football, while the other two were in rodeo and cheerleading.

“The findings suggest we need a better understanding of the causes of these injuries – the types of physical contact that are involved, the kinds of injuries that are sustained, and whether protective equipment is being used,” said Dr. Kristen Kucera, an associate professor of exercise and sports science and the director of the National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. “More information and education about internal organ injuries in sports can help athletes, coaches and parents make informed decisions that might help protect against these types of injuries in a more effective and more widespread manner.”
In the sports injury reports examined during the study, high school athletic trainers reported they believed that additional protective equipment could have prevented the internal organ injury in about 25% of the cases. The most commonly reported protective equipment that might have helped was a flak jacket or rib protector, which protect the lower rib cage and abdominal area.

As such, the study suggests that use of protective equipment might cut down on such mishaps. It also recommends the implementation of emergency action protocols and an increased presence by medical staff and athletic trainers at practices and games, especially at the high school level.

“The consequences of abdominal injuries – or of internal organ injuries of any kind – suffered on the playing field can be life changing,” Brian Haugen stressed. “It’s critical that young athletes, their parents, and school coaches and administrators all work together to better protect our children, while allowing them to pursue the sports they love.”

Since Taylor Haugen’s death, the foundation that bears his name has been dedicated to better protection of young athletes against the life-threatening risk of abdominal injuries through increased awareness and education and the availability of proper protective equipment. An abdominal injury might include damage to the liver, kidney, spleen or gallbladder, among other vital organs. In the recent sports injury study, the internal organs most often damaged were to be the kidney and spleen.

Through the foundation’s signature YESS Program (Youth Equipment for Sports Safety), thousands of high school athletes around the country have been outfitted with high-tech abdominal protective gear.

In addition, the foundation last year launched a national #PledgetoProtect campaign to expand the dialogue about abdominal injuries and encourage better protection against them.

The National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research (https://nccsir.unc.edu/) tracks fatal and severe sport-related injuries, illnesses and other conditions among high school and collegiate athletes in the U.S. The center has developed a national centralized reporting site (https://www.sportinjuryreport.org/) where anyone can report these events and basic information about what happened.

For more information about the Taylor Haugen Foundation, visit taylorhaugen.org. For more information about the National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research, visit https://nccsir.unc.edu/. To access the full injury study, “Incidence of Sport-Related Internal Organ Injuries Due to Direct-Contact Mechanisms Among High School and Collegiate Athletes Across 3 National Surveillance Systems,” download it from the February 2019 issue of the Journal of Athletic Training.

About the Taylor Haugen Foundation:

Based in Niceville, Florida, the Taylor Haugen Foundation was created to honor the memory of the 15-year-old Niceville High School student who died from an abdominal injury sustained during a football game in 2008. In the spirit of Taylor Haugen’s extraordinary character, the mission of the foundation is to provide support and recognition to faith-based student-athletes and community organizations through awards, scholarships and funding. The foundation serves to recognize the following attributes and character traits: Christian faith, athletics, community service, academics, and leadership.

The foundation is the only nonprofit organization in the United States whose mission focuses solely on
awareness of and protection against abdominal injuries, primarily for young athletes in junior high school and high school. It has set a goal of making sure that by 2028, everyone playing youth football throughout the United States will be wearing abdominal protection equipment as an essential part of their sports gear.

In 2018, the foundation launched its #PledgeToProtect campaign, inviting those closest to the issue – student-athletes, their coaches and trainers, parents, school administrators and boosters, the medical community, and others – to pledge to help better protect young football players from the risks of abdominal injuries, whether through awareness, or the use of the right protective gear, or proper sports instruction, or other measures.

The Taylor Haugen Foundation is a member of the Youth Sports Safety Alliance and works closely with the National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The organization also receives support from the Andrews Institute for Orthopaedics & Sports Medicine, in Gulf Breeze, Florida. For more information, visit http://www.taylorhaugen.org or call (850) 842-9093.

About the Internal Organ Injury Study:

The study, “Incidence of Sport-Related Internal Organ Injuries Due to Direct-Contact Mechanisms Among High School and Collegiate Athletes Across 3 National Surveillance Systems,” was published in the February 2019 issue of the Journal of Athletic Training, a publication of the National Athletic Trainers’ Association. The research was conducted by Kristen L. Kucera and Leah Cox Thomas, both of the Department of Exercise and Sport Science and the National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Zachary Y. Kerr, of the Department of Exercise and Sport Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Dustin W. Currie and R. Dawn Comstock, both of the Department of Epidemiology at the Colorado School of Public Health, in Aurora; Erin B. Wasserman, of the Datalys Center for Sports Injury Research and Prevention Inc., in Indianapolis; and Stephen Paul, of the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the University of Arizona, in Tucson.

The research concentrated on injuries to high school and college athletes that were caused by “direct contact,” i.e., contact with another player, an apparatus, a playing surface or an object, such as a ball. The report was produced using data compiled over a decade by three national sports-injury surveillance systems.

The study indicated that early detection of suspected internal organ injuries, as well as ongoing follow-up with the patients, might reduce the severity of the injuries. Most of the injuries identified occurred during football games and were due to player-on-player contact. The organs most-often damaged were the kidney and spleen. Roughly one-quarter of the non-catastrophic internal organ injuries outlined in the report were season ending.
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