

Caitlin Monaghan

Former high school athlete Garden City, N.Y.

Testimony before the Healthy Families and Communities Subcommittee of the House Committee on Education and Labor

“The Impact of Concussions on High School Athletes: The Local Perspective”

Monday, September 13, 2010

Good morning everyone. Thank you for inviting me here today. This is a wonderful opportunity and one that I could not pass up because as I know concussions are a serious injury and all parties involved in an athletes life need to know the graveness of them.

I had been a dedicated athlete all my life, playing both basketball and soccer from the time I was 6 years old. I loved being active and even more loved being part of a team. In many ways, being a serious athlete was expected in my town. Parents and children crowded the fields starting from Saturday mornings up until Sunday nights and as we got older our school weeks were filled with long practices and games.

It was in 7th grade when I experienced my first concussion. I had been tripped in a soccer game and ended up on the ground only to have an opposing player kick me in the head. Though today I don't remember all the details of what my parents did or what my coaches did, I do remember suffering from headaches and experiencing sensitivity to light for a few weeks. I rested and was back on the

field ignoring any laboring symptoms.

It was not until my senior year of high school when I realized the severity of the situation when it comes to concussions. It was the fall and our soccer team was playing our biggest rival. To say my teammates and I were pumped up would be an understatement. We knew that they would be aggressive and fight for every loose ball and commit to every ball tackle. We had to do the same to win.

In the second half, I ran to stop an oncoming shot on goal, which was kicked from no more than 7 feet away and received a blow to the side of the head. Within seconds I felt disoriented and hit the ground experiencing a black out. Play was not stopped right away because my team did not have possession of the ball. The coaches eventually came onto the field. They asked me a series of questions to see if I was alert. I was brought to the sideline, given an ice pack and checked on once or twice. Lying there I felt nauseous, disoriented and had a pounding headache. I was not in the condition to go back with the team on the bus, so a mother drove me directly home and told my parents about what happened. I missed the following day of school due to a severe headache and dizziness.

The symptoms continued over days; simply put I just didn't feel like myself. My mother took me to my pediatrician to get an opinion. He was very concerned and thus recommended I see a neurologist.

The neurologist ran all the necessary tests and concluded that I had in fact suffered a mild to severe concussion. I was prohibited from playing sports until my symptoms subsided. I was to see him for further check-ups as well as work with my high school's athletic trainer to track my symptoms. I was also alerted of the dangers of second shock syndrome and other consequences if I were to get hit again.

My world was playing sports and sitting on the sidelines was not enough.

After two weeks, I started to try light running and though the headaches and dizziness continued, I ached to get back to playing. To be honest, the pressure to play again was increasing. It was hard to convince my coaches that I was still injured, because when they saw me in school I was laughing and talking with my friends, I seemed fine. My teammates also wanted me back and questioned when I would return. I was back to full play within 3 weeks of the first concussion even though I was not 100%. Headaches lasted through practice and often my sight was blurry. But it was my senior year and since I was not going to continue with soccer in college, I wanted to give everything I had left in me, my coaches and teammates deserved that.

It was during a scrimmage at one of my first practices back when I received another concussion. I went to block a shot on goal and once again got a blow to the side of the head. Feeling very dizzy, I managed to reach the side of the field where I laid down on a bench. My coaches told me to rest. My athletic trainer was notified and rushed to the field. She gave me ice, asked me questions and told me to remain lying down. My parents were contacted and I went home.

My trainer notified that because of the time that had elapsed between both concussions I could no longer play. I was devastated. Though I attended every practice and cheered at every game till the end of the season, I no longer felt part of the team.

We returned to the neurologist and he ran more tests and concluded that after two concussions continuing with any physical activity would be dangerous. I was to rest and focus on letting my brain heal. It was from the time of the second concussion through winter break that I really noticed the effects of my concussions on my schoolwork. The headaches and sensitivity to light along with a loss of concentration made it hard to pay attention. My mother remembers me being very tired and not myself. I had been a good student, but my grades started to slip a little. Though my teachers had known that I was injured, I don't think they realized how long the symptoms persisted. I participated less and found it hard to concentrate on my homework, especially after trying to force myself to concentrate through the entire school day.

Come January, I pushed to play basketball believing that I was well rested and healed. I was team captain, and though I was captain during my junior year as well, I felt that this way my year to lead my team. My trainer agreed to keep an eye on me. I could participate in warm-up drills and over time could play more and more as long as I was symptom free.

In truth, I was not symptom free. The fast running and jumping that comes along with basketball just brought on worse headaches. I would experience blurry vision and dizziness. I kept playing and if it got bad I would ask to sub out for a quick rest. I did however realize that aggressive play during games could lead to an elbow to the head or I could be tripped and hit my head on the floor and thus I started to become very apprehensive. I would not be as aggressive under the hoop and held back to taking a charge. I was not playing my best and therefore my coach did not play me.

It was difficult to tell my basketball coach that the two concussions I suffered during soccer were still bothering me and that that was the reason I was not playing my best. He had been told about the incidents, but did not pay too much attention to the ramifications. He had been a high school and college football player and thus concussions to him were a normal injury that required a little rest. I once again sat cheering from the sideline.

Though my senior year was wonderful and a time that I look back on with joy, I know that those two concussions made a huge impact on my life. On top of the symptoms that eventually eased, I had watched two sports seasons end from the bench, had a hard time concentrating in school affecting my grades and above all had felt that I had let many people down. I left for college knowing that I would not play sports at a collegiate level and was even weary to kick around a soccer ball or

shoot hoops with my friends at school.

Today, I am fine. My world has expanded far beyond soccer and basketball, but when I hear the stories of people who have suffered from concussions I am reminded of my own story. I believe we need to do a better job advocating for the athlete and it starts with educating every party involved; parents, coaches, athletic trainers, teachers, school nurses and the athletes themselves.

The symptoms, dangers and steps to take when a concussion occurs need to be clearly outlined including regulations concerning return to play. The conversation needs to start and continue between all parties because unlike other injuries concussion can't be seen. I can't take off a bandage or hobbled around on crutches to prove that I am injured. It is only through constant communication that symptoms can be monitored and tracked, but unfortunately that communication can stop when athletes want to play again or are pressured to play again from coaches and teammates. Therefore a standard school policy is where it starts, but certainly not where it ends.

Thank you for your time and more importantly for the efforts to bring the severity of concussions to the forefront of health issues.