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“The Impact of Concussions on High School Athletes”
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Testimony of Michelle Pelton
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Good Morning! First I would like to thank you for inviting me here today. This is great honor to be here to talk about the affects of a concussion. When I was told about this opportunity, I quickly agreed because I want to make a difference and help athletes be aware of what could happen. Everyone thinks that something like this would never happen to them, I thought the same thing, but I am a perfect example.

I am here today to share with you my traumatic story on how much concussions have affected me and my life. I played my first basketball game when I was just seven years old and instantly fell in love with the sport. (I was even named “rookie of the year”). That following spring, I had the opportunity to fall in love with softball as well. My life revolved around sports.

In junior high school my basketball coach loved how aggressive I was. But maybe I was too aggressive. A girl from the other team and I collided while fighting for the ball. We both fell to the ground. All I thought was “ouch my head” and just got up and continued to play. Even though we both fell to the ground holding our heads, coaches, refs nor parents had thought anything of it. That was the start of my series of seven concussions over the next four years.

The day following my collision, I stood home from school due to an unbearable headache. I then passed out and my mother called 911. At the emergency room, they in fact did diagnose me with a concussion and said I could return to play basketball in 2 weeks or when my symptoms were gone. As would any athlete, I convinced my parents that after the 2 weeks, I was symptom free. That was a big lie, I was still having headaches but I thought I was fine to go back a play, it was just a headache. And as fate would have it, the first game I return to, I collide with a girl again, this time leaving me hospitalized with a second concussion. At the hospital I did not know where I was, what happened or even what school I attended. I had no idea how my life would change because of this concussion.

In the days, weeks and months to come my daily life changed. Daily headaches, dizziness, memory loss, lack of concentration, depression are just a few of the symptoms that were part of my everyday life. School would never be the same and **NO MORE SPORTS**. I had the worst case of Post Concussion Syndrome that my pediatrician had ever seen. This would lead to a series of specialist that I would see over the next several years. I went to the Head Trauma Clinic at Boston Children’s Hospital several times for evaluations and recommendations, I also saw a Chiropractor, went for weekly

acupuncture, had a speech therapist, massage therapy and a therapist, all to help me learn to live with what had happened.

Two weeks is definitely not enough time to let your brain rest and recover. I learned this at my first visit with Dr. Neil McGrath from the Sports Concussion New England clinic. During the visit, I took the ImpACT test, and my scores showed that I was nowhere near ready to go back to play. At first I resented Dr. McGrath, because he was taking away something that I loved. However, I now know the risks involved with not taking care of your brain. The ImpACT test can show something that no x-ray, CT scan or MRI can.

After several months my symptoms finally got better and I was cleared by Dr. McGrath to go back to play sports. You see, my love for sports far outweighed the potential risk of playing again. To me life without basketball and softball just wasn't life.

During my high school years, I excelled in basketball and even more so in softball. I had college coaches looking at me in softball when I was only a sophomore. I couldn't wait for my senior year; however it was nothing like how I had imagined it. I received 5 concussions (2 playing softball, one from basketball, one from being punched by a client at my co-operative employment job and the final concussion sustained in December of 2008, a car accident) during my high school years that left me without half of my senior year, including softball. For the last 5 months of my senior year, I was home tutored. Each morning was a struggle to get up and face the day. The girl that fell in love with basketball when she was seven dreaded going to practice every day. I had headaches, lack of concentration, mood swings, depression and I just did not care about anything. I lost the pride and the joy of finally being a senior and a captain on my softball team. If I had played, I would have been named female athlete of the year. While all my classmates were involved in senior activities I was home depressed and in constant pain, and life had become a blur. I wasn't involved in any senior activities or the fun of just being a senior. I lost potential 4 year scholarships to play the sport I love. My dreams were crushed.

I cannot even begin to explain the daily struggle my life has become and everything I have lost because of my concussions. No one can see my injury but it's there. I know I have learned to overcome and compensated for my injuries because I am so determined to keep as many of my dreams in my life as possible, but not without a tremendous price. Every day I endure memory loss, lack of concentration, depression, slow processing speed and cognitive effects that makes my everyday life a battle. Yes, I have overcome many obstacles and accomplished a lot considering my injuries but no one but me truly understands what it is like to live everyday like this. If I can prevent even one person from experiencing what has happen to me then my trip here was a huge success.

I recently watched an ESPN special on a young man named Preston Plevretes who suffered only two concussions; however his second one changed his life forever. This shows that every concussion can be life threatening, even if you've had 1, 2, or 7. His second concussion caused him to lose consciousness; he woke for a few minutes, and then lapsed into a coma. He had a massive blood clot, and needed lifesaving surgery. His first concussion was not treated properly. I will quote from the young man: he stated "I

could have sat on the sidelines for a season, but now I will sit on the sidelines for the rest of my life". Preston is now in a wheelchair, has a home health aide, and receives intense physical and speech therapy. Preston is only 23 years old.

Concussions have been called the invisible injury; from my brief story I hope this Committee realizes the long term effects of concussions are not invisible. Over the last few years I have learned six important factors that cause concern for high school athletes

1. From my PSY 51 college course I learned the human brain does not fully develop until around the age of 24.
2. Research by the University of Pittsburgh Medical School found that high school athletes do not recover from concussions as quickly and report more symptoms than college athletes.
3. The National Athletic Trainers Association reports that over 50% of US high schools do not have access to an athletic trainer.
4. According to the Center Disease Control the main reason a high school athlete does not report a concussion is not the fear of losing playing time, but the lack of knowledge of what a concussion is and the potential long term effects if not reported and treated correctly.
5. Recent studies show that more than 62,000 concussions occur each year in high school sports, with football for accounting for about 60% of them. However, this is not solely a male/football issue in high school. The concussion rate in high school soccer is 68 % higher for girls than it is for boys. In high school basketball, female concussion rates nearly triple the boys' rate according to a study completed at Ohio State. Other studies show similar % differences between girls' softball and boys' baseball.
6. High school athletes are 3 times more likely to experience a second concussion if concussed once during a season.

Every concussion is unique and there is no one formula that can handle an injury so complex. Main care for all concussions will include rest periods, since the only way to start the recovery period is usually complete rest, both physical and mental. However this Committee should encourage a standard Athletic Concussion School Policy that would be used as a guide by all schools in the US. Such an initiative could follow the steps that were used to ensure all public schools created a Wellness Plan if they wanted to participate in the National School Lunch Program. Such a national athletic concussion policy could include:

1. Concussion education for players, parents, coaches and school staff.

2. Pre-season baseline computerized testing to establish levels of memory, reaction time and processing speed. (ImPACT testing is the best researched and most commonly used tool to accomplish this task)
3. Use of a standard sideline test that screens for common concussion symptoms (SAC – the Sideline Assessment of Concussion is a reliable tool to accomplish this initial assessment)
4. Once a concussion has been identified, the athlete should visit the emergency room to be sure the injury has not caused any head trauma issues beyond a concussion. A follow up visit with their primary care physician would be encouraged.
5. Recovery period will include follow up ImPACT testing, on-going medical visits, reduced academic classroom demands reflected in an IEP or 504 Plan and gradual return to some form of physical activity.
6. The return to play should be decided by a team that includes parents, coach, trainer, teachers, school nurse, guidance counselor and athlete. These decisions should be based on all the clinical information available, concussion history, length of time since the concussion, performance in the classroom and lack of symptoms during rest and light exercise.

Beyond this school policy this Committee could encourage the use of Public Service Announcements during national sporting events that address the dangers of untreated athletic concussions and promote the distribution of the Center for Disease Control athletic concussion products called “Heads Up” to all national organizations that work with schools and athletic associations.

Thank you for your time today and for careful consideration on this very important public health issue. It can and will impact a lot of athletes.